





# The Princeton Theological Review

## Fall 2003 Developing a Personal Theology

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**T**he Princeton Theological Review is a student-run, bi-annual journal that exists to serve students within the Princeton Theological Seminary body as well as the wider theological community by providing a resource that challenges, informs and equips them to become more effective and faithful witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is committed to engaging theological issues in ways that are grounded in Scripture, centered on Jesus Christ, formed by the work of the Holy Spirit, and oriented toward the historic confessions and contemporary reflections of the church.

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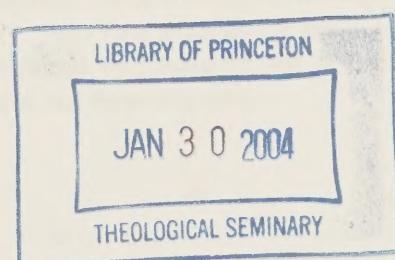
The Princeton Theological Review has been published by students of this seminary for the past twelve years. While you may or may not know of it and its history, we are pleased to say that this academic year has brought a fresh start for the PTR. In this transition, we are making a few alterations and wanted to inform you of the most significant change, that being our decision to no longer publish under the name The Charles Hodge Society. The reasons for this change are two fold, the first being a practical one. The Charles Hodge Society was founded in the mid-1990's to foster rigorous theological discussion on the Princeton Seminary campus. It facilitated this engagement through a number of different ministries, one of those being the Princeton Theological Review. However, over the last several years the PTR has persisted as the only remaining ministry of the original society. Therefore in order to avoid confusion and redundancy, we are now simply functioning as the "Princeton Theological Review," existing as a sub-group of the larger campus ministry of the Theological Students' Fellowship.

Our second and more important reason for this change is one that relates to our seminary community, the institution's history and the journal's purpose. We discovered that operating under the name "The Charles Hodge Society" both hindered our fellowship among students on campus and also stood against the mission we purported. These impediments were due to the late theologian's participation in and perpetuation of the institution of slavery. Though we value some aspects of Hodge's work, we want to clearly reject the evil of racism as a contradiction of the gospel and reaffirm the journal's longstanding desire to be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ both on this campus and to the subscribers.<sup>1</sup> In acknowledging and mourning the history of injustice in which this institution – and thus we ourselves – stand, we hope that this change of name will encourage further thought, discussion, and action as it concerns the systemic racism that still exists in the Christian community.

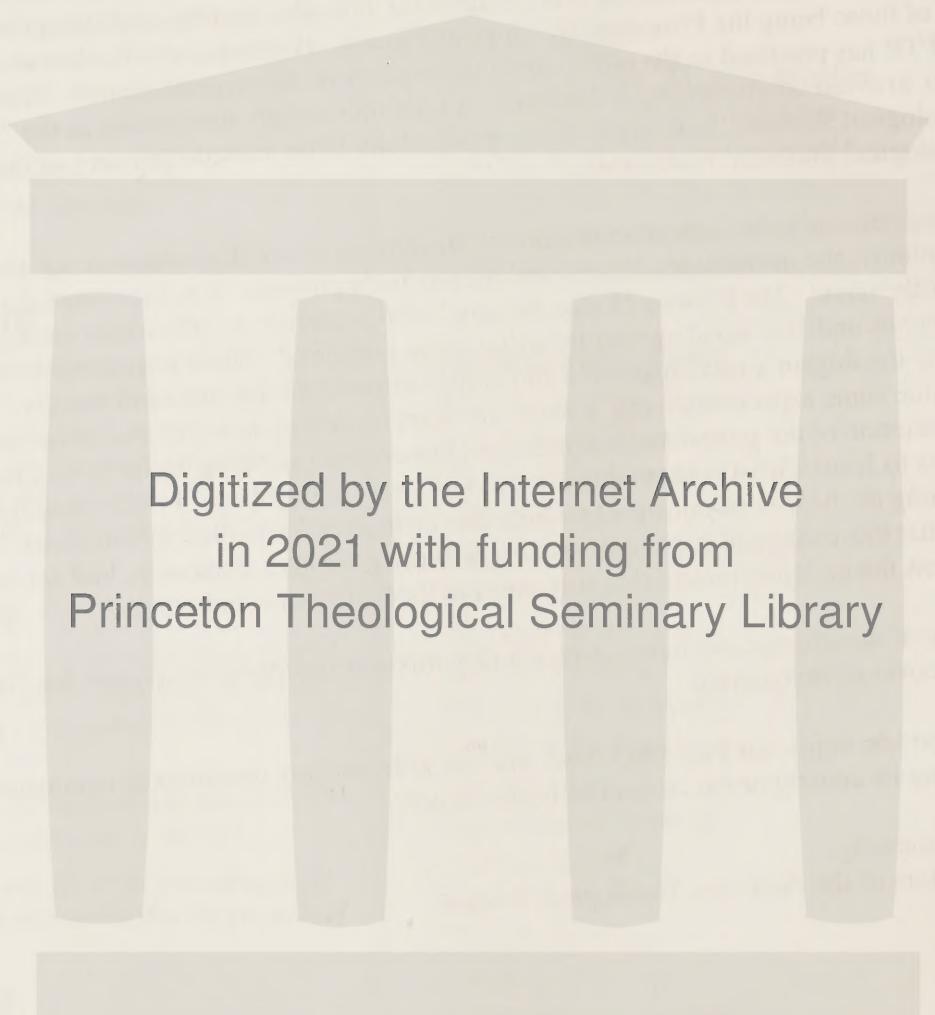
In view of this change, we have adapted a new mission statement, which you can find on the inside cover of this journal.

We hope you enjoy our Fall 2003 issue, and we welcome any questions or comments regarding its content or the content of future issues.

Yours sincerely,  
The editors of the Princeton Theological Review



<sup>1</sup> Our Spring 2004 issue will discuss issues of racism and Christianity in greater depth.



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# Developing a Personal Theology

In an age where the extent of “personal” adaptations is bewildering and seemingly infinite, the appeal for a personal theology may appear to feed our culture’s addictions to individualistic modifications of reality. We live in a time of personal finance, fitness, spirituality, technology, and investment; do we really need a personal theology as well? And if so, what does a personal theology entail? In preparing this issue of the PTR these questions were close at hand. Yet throughout the process of preparation, our conviction grew that this theme is a vital one to consider. In view of its confusing connotations, however, our theme necessitates clarification.

First, in emphasizing the word personal, we mean to distinguish it from the more mordant adjective “individualistic.” Theology can never be the latter: it must always be shaped in the context of the community of believers. As John Burgess makes plain in his article “Calling Pastor-Theologians,” it is the task of the whole community of Christians to shape the theological vision for the life of the church, not individuals isolated in the caverns of their personal preoccupations. Though by all means valid, the questions and concerns of the individual must be brought into the light of the community. Indeed, the seminary acts as the crucible for such communal formation. Theology can only become authentically personal once it is habited and formulated in and for the church.

Second, even while rejecting the individualistic descriptive, theology should be intensely formative for each person in the worshipping community. The enduring danger of theological study is that it is continually under the threat of mutation, in which it grotesquely contorts into an activity of detached observation rather than an encounter with the living God. If theologians are to fulfill their calling for the life of the church, they must persistently resist such distortions, keeping their gaze locked upon the One whom theology witnesses and proclaims. Theology then must remain personal, because the God we confess, who is the focus of our theology, resists all objectification, overturns all categorization, and summons all people to repent and follow Jesus Christ. As Michael Langford argues in his article, “Theology as Spiritual Salvation,” theology is important because it contains not only our confession but also the source of our life and salvation. In addition, Christina Busman makes clear in her articulation of Luther’s doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers that theology is for every person in the church, not just for those who have the privilege of formal study. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the world and the Savior of humanity, and as the focus of theology he ensures that every member of his community cannot authentically encounter him without being changed. He alone frees us personally to be the kind of humble, bold, prayerful theologians that our Lord calls us to be.

Third, our theme emphasizes that theology is not a static possession, but requires focused development. Alister

McGrath demonstrates through his “Personal Theological Vision” that such development never reaches an endpoint, but is always forging into new horizons and uncharted territories. As Christian theologians, we never have the luxury of arriving. For though our message is simple, it is vast and inexhaustible in its implications. Our confession of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ remains the same, yet the gospel message is ever stimulating and provoking us to more faithful forms of obedient proclamation, bearing new life in a multiplicity of contexts. As Chris Hays exhibits in his own struggle with the doctrine of predestination, this process of development is never easy, always unnerving, and requires careful self-scrutiny and disciplined listening to our traditions and the Scriptures. On the one hand, this process implies continual repentance. Obedience and submission to Jesus Christ in the task of theology will inevitably involve the destruction of idols, the upheaval of insipid systems of unbelief, and the exposure of our compromises to cultural distortions of Christianity. On the other hand, this process of development will also entail continual faith, trusting in and following the One who grants us the gift of theology, seeking to bring our confession more consistently under the rule of God and in accordance with the Scriptures. As our theology witnesses to the Kingdom of God, as our methods are performed in the fruit and power of the Holy Spirit, as our feeble systems center their cumulative energies around the cross of Jesus Christ and all that his death and resurrection have accomplished, then, and only then, will our theology contain the capacity to lead the church into worship, adoration and proclamation of its Lord.

Finally, theology is most profoundly personal because of the claim it makes on the lives of those who do it. Theology does not simply transform; it also sends. The One to whom we witness in our theology is the missionary God. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you,” our Savior instructed. Ultimately our theology must result in the work our God commissions us to continue, and all our labors in these seminary years are under the strong call to bear this privileged status as missionaries of the sending God. “No one needs so much of the grace of God as a person who lives and moves and has [his or her] being in a theological seminary,”<sup>1</sup> once wrote John Mackay, former president of PTS. May God grant us the grace we need to be faithful to this call, becoming the sort of theologians that Jesus has died and risen to create.



Corey Widmer  
General Editor

## Note

1. John Mackay, *A Preface to Christian Theology* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1948), p.126.

# A Personal Theological Vision

by Alister McGrath

*A lecture given at Princeton Theological Seminary on Thursday, 9 October 2003.*

It is a great pleasure to be with you and to share something of my excitement about Christian theology, as well as explain how I came to love this discipline, and follow a particular way of approaching it. My discovery of the joys of both Christianity and theology was rather convoluted and indirect, coming as something of a surprise to me, as much as to anyone else. So I hope that you will forgive me if I tell you something of this double process of discovery, which has led me to where I am today.

I have always been fascinated by the natural world. When I was about ten years old, I built a small refracting telescope out of some old camera lenses, so that I could begin to explore the heavens. I learned the names of the constellations and brighter stars, observed the moons of Jupiter, and studied the mountains and seas of the moon. A new world was opened up to me. I can still recall the shivers of excitement I felt on a cold winter's night, when I first saw the rings of the planet Saturn.

Yet my interest in the sciences was by no means limited to astronomy. An old microscope, originally belonging to a great-uncle who was a pathologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, allowed me to begin the serious study of biology around the same time. I would regularly collect local pond water and found myself intrigued by its microscopic plant and animal life. It seemed obvious to me that I would end up in a scientific career, possibly related to medicine.

While I was a school student at the Methodist College, Belfast (1966-71), I immersed myself in the study of the natural sciences, specializing in mathematics, physics, and chemistry. While all these subjects excited me, none was quite so stimulating as chemistry. Above all, I developed an interest in some aspects of *inorganic chemistry*, especially the theoretical analysis of inorganic ligands. One of my favorite books while studying chemistry during my final years at school was *Inorganic Chemistry*, by C. S. G. Phillips and R. J. P. Williams. When I discovered that Williams was a chemistry don at Wadham College, Oxford, an idea began to crystallize in my mind. I wanted to go to Oxford University to study chemistry, under R. J. P. Williams.

In early December 1971, I went to Oxford for an interview. I had never been to the ancient university city

before, and got completely lost on trying to find my way from the railway station to Wadham College. My initial impressions were not especially encouraging. The city was enveloped in fog for much of my visit, and power blackouts meant that the college was plunged into darkness for hours at a time. I braced myself for the interview with the college's three chemistry dons: J. R. Knowles, C. J. S. M. Simpson, and Williams. In the end, it was Williams himself who subjected me to close questioning for twenty minutes about the theoretical basis of the nephelauxetic effect. I emerged from the interview, convinced that I had not given particularly good answers to his probing questions. They obviously thought otherwise. A few days later, Knowles sent me a handwritten note, telling me that I was to be offered a major scholarship at the college, hoping that I would accept. So in October, 1971, I made my way from Belfast to Oxford, traveling by ship to the port of Liverpool, and then by rail to Oxford.

Then, events took what I can only describe as a rather unexpected turn. I had never had the slightest interest in religion, let alone Christian theology, while at school. In fact, I regarded Christianity and the natural sciences as mutually incompatible on the basis of the incorrigible certainties about life, widely entertained by teenagers. For, like many back in the 1960s, I had bought into Marxism in quite a big way. I was completely convinced that the future lay with atheism, and that religion would either die of exhaustion or be eliminated by a resentful humanity within my lifetime. I even tried, without much success, to found an "Atheist Society" at my school.

I was firmly of the view that the natural sciences offered perfectly adequate explanations for every aspect of reality. My views at this stage were very similar to those later expressed by Richard Dawkins. Religion was irrational superstition, which depended on blind faith on the part of very stupid people; science, in marked contrast, proved its theories for certain. It was an extremely

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*The Rev. Prof. Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University and Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.*

simple worldview – probably deriving much of its appeal from precisely that simplicity – which I was able to maintain without undue difficulty. Until, that is, I began to study the history and philosophy of science in my final year at school, in preparation for going up to Oxford. Suddenly, things seemed rather more complicated and rather less straightforward than I realized.

I had read popular works such as A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* and Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, and I was persuaded that atheism was the only worldview that had any intellectual integrity. Some doubts began to creep into my mind while studying the history and philosophy of science during my final months at school, when I realized that the “science proves things, religion demands blind obedience” school of thought was talking educated nonsense. But I was able to repress those doubts without undue difficulty.

In my first term at Oxford University, late in 1971, I began to discover that Christianity was rather more interesting and considerably more exciting than I had realized. While I had been severely critical of Christianity as a young man, I had never extended that same critical evaluation to atheism, tending to assume that it was self-evidently correct, and was hence exempt from being assessed in this way. During October and November 1971, I began to discover that the intellectual case for atheism was rather insubstantial. As I talked to friends, my doubts about atheism's credibility began to coalesce into a realization that atheism was a belief system, where I had assumed it to be a factual statement about reality.

I also discovered that I knew far less about Christianity than I had assumed. It was only when I went up to Oxford in 1971 that I began to realize how little I knew about the history and philosophy of the natural sciences or the nature of Christian belief. Like my fellow-countryman C. S. Lewis, I found myself experiencing “the steady unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.” To cut a long story short, I discovered that I had rejected what I did not really understand, and accepted what I increasingly came to realize was an imaginatively impoverished and emotionally deficient substitute. Clearly, I had some major rethinking to do. By the end of November 1971, I had made my decision: I turned my back on my schoolboy faith, and embraced another. I left atheism behind, and committed myself to Christianity.

This year, I completed writing a book on atheism, revisiting the faith that I have now abandoned.<sup>1</sup> It was an unsettling experience. It was like the Irishman who leaves his native land to settle in America, retaining fond memories of his homeland – memories made even fonder

by a sense of dislocation, physical and cultural, from his homeland. As the years pass, those memories become increasingly romanticized, softened by the passage of time, tinged with nostalgia. On revisiting the homeland, some of its fondly-remembered bright colors turn out to be rather drab, its idealized vast landscapes more cramped, and its cities more derelict than the memory allowed. The ideas that once excited and enthralled me seemed, on being revisited, rather humdrum and mundane. The distorting effects of memory soon became clear to me; the rooms of the intellectual house I had once

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***Christian theology is a legitimate, coherent intellectual discipline, with its own sense of identity, place and purpose.***

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inhabited now appeared dingy and stale. I had moved on, and, to my surprise, found less than I had expected in the revisiting to make me wish to move back.

Having now discovered that Christianity was decidedly more resilient and intrinsically fulfilling than I could ever have imagined, I began to wonder what to do next. Should I abandon my study of chemistry and switch to theology? The conclusion that I came to was quite simple. I would complete my studies in chemistry. In fact, I would do more than that: I would undertake research in some aspect of the natural sciences. Then I would switch to theology, and try to establish the connection between them.

So after completing my undergraduate studies in chemistry in 1975, having specialized in aspects of quantum theory, I began a research program in molecular biophysics, which would allow me to develop new physical techniques for measuring diffusion rates in biological membranes and their models – in other words, to measure how quickly components of natural or artificial membranes moved about. It was a fascinating topic, which allowed me to branch out into some aspects of the vast field of molecular biology, as well as keep up my reading of the physical and chemical literature.

However, I was not prepared to wait to begin the formal study of theology. Although hardly anyone studied theology at Wadham College back in the 1970s, the college library was reasonably well stocked with theological books. I found myself working through them, taking notes which might one day come in useful (although, to tell the truth, they never did). So I became an amateur

theologian, at this stage distinguished far more by enthusiasm than wisdom. Yet that enthusiasm was compelling. I knew that I would not be satisfied until I had wrestled with the classical questions of theology. I explained my situation to J. R. Knowles, my chemistry tutor at this time, who subsequently went on to become Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University. He urged me to “stoke the intellectual fires” that burned within me. But how, I wondered, could I keep up my interest in the sciences, while at the same time study theology properly? There was a limit to what I could teach myself; I would need help.

By this stage, I was deeply involved in my doctoral research in the Department of Biochemistry at Oxford, focusing on aspects of molecular biophysics, with a particular interest in the biophysical properties of biological membranes and their models. A major concern was the manner in which artificial models of complex biological membranes could be designed, validated and deployed. I won an E. P. A. Cephalosporin Research Studentship to allow me to undertake this work, on the basis of a research paper prepared during my final year as an undergraduate. Although my work largely took the form of practical empirical research, I also found time to work systematically on aspects of the history and philosophy of the natural sciences. The research went well and led to some rewards. I was awarded a Fellowship by the European Molecular Biology Organization to work for several months at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, and a Senior Scholarship at Merton College, Oxford.

It was while I was working at Utrecht, during the long, dry summer of 1976 that the idea came to me – an idea that would captivate my imagination and bring about the redirection of my life. While working on aspects of phosphatidylcholine transport in biological membranes and their models, I had time to reflect on the more philosophical and theological issues that were raised by molecular biophysics in general. Here is how I later described the origins of the vision that lay behind a scientific theology:<sup>2</sup>

I cannot recall quite how the idea came into my mind; it was as if a mental bolt of lightning flashed across my consciousness, eclipsing my thoughts on how best to apply Fourier Transforms to study the time-resolved anisotropy of a fluorescent probe that I had developed for studying lipid viscosity in biological membranes and their models. The idea that shot through my mind was simple: explore the relation between Christian theology and the natural sciences,

using philosophy and history as dialogue partners. It would be grounded in and faithful to the Christian tradition, yet open to the insights of the sciences. This would be more than a mere exploration of a working relationship; it would be a proposal for a synergy, a working together, a mutual cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches – in short, a scientific theology.

But how could I realize this vision, when I had yet to begin the formal study of theology? As I returned home to Oxford late that summer, it seemed to me that I had little hope of achieving the goals I had set myself. I moved my belongings to my new rooms at Merton College late in August, and prepared to enjoy my time at this ancient school, which had been kind enough to elect me to a Senior Scholarship. In September, it occurred to me to

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***A scientific theology attempts to lay a conceptual foundation that encourages academic engagement and the forging of intellectual connections.***

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check the small print and see to what exactly the scholarship entitled me. And there I found my answer. As well as promising free lodging, financial support and dining rights at high table, I found that the scholarship allowed its holder either to undertake advanced research, or to study for a second undergraduate degree. And funding was guaranteed for the lifetime of the scholarship – two years.

Having dabbled in theology in a very amateurish manner for five years or so, I decided that the time had come to treat the subject with the seriousness it deserved. I therefore asked permission to continue my research in molecular biology, while at the same time beginning the formal study of theology at Oxford. This would mean completing a three year undergraduate course in two years, a privilege Oxford University allowed to graduates, who were presumably assumed to be capable of the additional pressures this created.

My request caused a degree of consternation and bewilderment among the fellows of the college, not least because Merton did not take undergraduates to read theology; nevertheless, they gave me the permission I needed. And so, from October 1976, I spent part of my working day in the Oxford University Department of Biochemistry, and the remainder of the time trying to

master the basics of Christian theology. I benefited considerably from Oxford's commitment to the tutorial system, in that I was able to study the subject at the feet of some of the finest scholars in the field. I also encountered the ideas of Karl Barth, which I continue to find an invaluable stimulus to my own thinking, no matter how much I may disagree with them.

In 1978 I was awarded my doctorate in molecular biology, while at the same time gaining first class honors in theology, and winning the Denyer and Johnson Prize in theology for the best examination performance that year. As a result, I was invited to lunch shortly afterwards by a senior editor at Oxford University Press, who asked me to consider writing a book on the theme of Christianity and the natural sciences, in particular to respond to Richard Dawkin's book *The Selfish Gene*. I gave this proposal very serious consideration. However, I came to the conclusion that I would need to immerse myself in the further study of religion, and especially the history of Christian theology, before I could make a positive and informed contribution to this field.

After this, I transferred to Cambridge University, taking up an award at St John's College, Cambridge. The "Naden Studentship in Divinity," which I held for the period 1978-80, was established in the eighteenth century to encourage the study of serious theology. I benefited significantly from this new intellectual environment. My initial hope had been to study the Copernican controversy as a means of opening up the interaction between Christian theology and the natural sciences through a single case study. However, I was persuaded to study Martin Luther instead. This led me on to a detailed study of historical theology, focusing on three inter-related themes: the theology of one individual (Martin Luther), the general theological development of a specific period (the sixteenth-century Reformation), and the historical development of one specific doctrine (the doctrine of justification, which was of critical importance to Luther in particular, and to the Reformation in general). This led to three major publications, as follows:

1. *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.
2. *Iustitia Dei. A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Second edition 1998; third edition 2005.
3. *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987. Second edition, 2003.

One by-product of this detailed engagement with Christian theology was my growing realization that there

were too few introductions to the subject that assumed that their readers knew nothing about the subject. After several years of teaching theology at Oxford, I put together a theological textbook and collection of readings that seem to have helped others in a similar position.<sup>1</sup> As western culture becomes increasingly secular, theological educationalists face an increasing challenge – to introduce the ideas of Christian theology to a new generation, who have little or no inherited knowledge of the Christian tradition.

My research continued thereafter, focusing on mastering the complexities of the development of Christian doctrine, and the specifics of leading individuals and controversies that I regarded as being of central importance to the development of a scientific theology. Three landmarks may be noted along the way to the production of a scientific theology, as follows:

1. *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
2. *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998
3. *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999

The first of these landmarks dealt with the pressures that lead to the formulation of Christian doctrines in the first place, and the factors which account for at least some aspects of their subsequent development. This allowed me to begin a critical engagement with the theories of George Lindbeck, which is consolidated in the second volume of *A Scientific Theology*.

The second landmark signaled my readiness to begin publishing on themes related to a scientific theology. This work takes the form of a considerably expanded version of a lecture I was invited to deliver at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Utrecht in January 1997 on "The Relation of the Natural Sciences and Christian Theology," and it sets out – although in a rather tentative manner – some of the themes that will be developed more fully confidently in the three volumes of *A Scientific Theology*. Perceptive readers will note that I had still not encountered – let alone assimilated – Roy Bhaskar's form of critical realism at this point. It was a particular pleasure to be able to return to the University of Utrecht to speak on this theme more than twenty years after conceiving the project there in the first place, and an even greater pleasure to be able to speak again at Utrecht in April 2003, on the completion of the project.

The third landmark represents my growing interest in, and appreciation of, Thomas F. Torrance, whose 1969

work *Theological Science* seemed to me to open up a new way of approaching the theological appropriation of the methods of the natural sciences. In investigating his ideas, I found myself researching the human being behind these ideas, leading to the publication of his biography in 1999. Torrance's careful and perceptive engagement with Barth's views on natural theology seemed to me to represent a major advance. I also found myself agreeing strongly, for both theological and scientific reasons, with his emphasis on theological science engaging with reality *kata phisin* – according to its own distinctive

***A public theology is able to stand  
its own ground, while engaging  
in dialogue with others.***

nature. Readers will find that I engage with Torrance extensively in the first and second volumes of *A Scientific Theology* (indeed, I dedicate the first to him).

The three volumes of “a scientific theology” can be seen as the proximate goal of my theological work thus far. So what is the vision lying behind a scientific theology? In what follows, I shall set out the major themes that lay behind my work in this field.

The critical thing to appreciate is that a scientific theology is a *system*, not a single idea or cluster of ideas. A technological analogy will clarify my point. In the fifteenth century, Johann Gutenberg developed the printing press to the point at which the large-scale commercial production of printed books could begin. Although it is often suggested that Gutenberg's breakthrough was the invention of moveable type, this is an inadequate account of his development. This new invention was placed within a system of components, each of which was brought together to create a new way of producing books. A number of existing technologies were combined with a major innovation – moveable metal type – to allow a new technology to emerge, which was greater than the sum of its individual parts. Put together, these made a coherent system, in which these developments were integrated. Each successive stage in the process depended upon that which preceded it.

Gutenberg's printing system included the following components:

1. The kind of wooden screw-press traditionally

used to crush grapes for wine or olives for oil, or to compress bales of cloth. A similar press was already used in paper production, to squeeze water out of newly-made paper. Gutenberg appears to have realized that the process that removes water from paper might also be used to print ink onto that same medium. An existing idea was thus adapted to a new purpose.

2. A new type of ink, made from lampblack – the soot deposited by candle flames on cold surfaces – and varnish. The older printing technology used a water-soluble brown ink, which faded over time; the new process used a dark black ink, which was permanent.
3. Moveable type – that is, letters which could be re-used after printing one book.

The essential point here is that Gutenberg brought these elements together in such a way that they were integrated into an entire system, which was capable of achievements that transcended the capacities of any one element.

A scientific theology is also to be seen as an integrated system, which brings together in a functional manner a number of important ideas, some of which find their first significant theological application. The accumulated significance of these is greater than any of their individual contributions. These interlocking elements include:

1. The development and thorough examination of the concept of the working methods and assumptions as a helpmate and comparator for Christian theology (*ancilla theologiae*).
2. The insistence that Christian orthodoxy possesses in itself adequate intellectual resources to undertake a direct and fruitful engagement with the natural sciences.
3. The identification of the scientific and theological consequences of the postmodern deconstruction of nature.
4. The re-appropriation of the Christian doctrine of creation as a means of revalidating an engagement with the natural world.
5. The retrieval and reconstruction of a responsible and authentically Christian natural theology.
6. The reaffirmation of theological realism, especially in a non-foundationalist context.
7. The important concept of a “tradition-mediated” rationality, developed in response to the failures of both the Enlightenment project and its antithetically-conceived postmodern alternatives.

8. The theological application of Roy Bhaskar's "critical realism," especially the highly significant notion of the "stratification of reality." This represents the first such theological application of this important philosophical development.
9. A reaffirmation of the legitimate place and purpose of doctrine in the Christian life.
10. The development of new models of doctrinal development.
11. The revalidation of the traditional notions of "heresy" and "orthodoxy."
12. The reaffirmation of the legitimate place of metaphysics in Christian theology.

These elements of a scientific theology are not disparate and disconnected ideas, linked together at a purely verbal level. They are seamlessly integrated to yield a coherent vision of the theological enterprise, and a justification of its existence and methods in the face of modern and postmodern criticisms and anxieties.

The distinctive feature of a scientific theology is its critical yet positive use of the natural sciences as both comparator and helpmate for the theological task, seen against the backdrop of the intellectual engagement with reality as a whole. While a scientific theology is positioned somewhere on a delicate and at times somewhat fuzzy borderline between a treatise on the relation of Christian theology and the natural sciences and a full-blown work on theological methodology, there is a third way in which these three volumes might be read – perhaps the most significant, even if it has not been uppermost in my mind as I wrote them – namely, as an apologetics for the entire theological enterprise itself. Christian theology is here conceived and presented as a legitimate, coherent intellectual discipline, with its own sense of identity, place and purpose.

This leads to one of the major themes of the vision that lies behind a scientific theology – my deep longing to develop a public theology, capable of interacting with other disciplines on its own terms. A public theology is able to stand its own ground, while engaging in dialogue with others. I have intense misgivings concerning the insular approaches to theology that I discern in some theological quarters, which prevents theology from dialoguing, debating and learning. The project for theology set out by John Milbank and others in the "radical orthodoxy" school seem to me to merely drive Christian theology into a self-imposed and intellectually sterile isolation, refusing to talk to anyone in case their theological purity gets contaminated. The approach I set out, having placed the theological enterprise on a secure footing,

encourages public debate and dialogue.

The roots of a scientific theology are thoroughly evangelical, resting on a deep and passionate conviction that "theology must be nourished and governed at all points by Holy Scripture, and that it seeks to offer a faithful and coherent account of what it finds there."<sup>4</sup> This task of rendering Scripture faithfully is, in my view, best carried out in dialogue with the "great tradition" of Christian theology and in response to the challenges to the Christian faith that are raised by other disciplines – such as the natural sciences. Yet I have no doubt that many Christian theologians, who would not wish to identify or style themselves as "evangelical," will find much in these volumes that they will be able to welcome and appropriate; indeed, my correspondence since these volumes began to appear in print demonstrates that it is being widely and appreciatively read in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic theological circles, as well as amongst natural scientists.

Yet in writing these volumes, I have had in mind a specific concern about evangelicalism, which was explored most thoroughly in 1994 by historian Mark Noll. In his *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*,<sup>5</sup> Noll argued that evangelicalism, although having developed a robust theological base since the Second World War, had yet to establish connections between its theological vision and other aspects of human intellectual and cultural activity. Evangelicalism's theological development had outstripped its capacity and will to make appropriate intellectual applications. In developing the scientific theology project, I have been deeply mindful of this consideration. A scientific theology attempts to lay a conceptual foundation that encourages academic engagement and the forging of intellectual connections.

The approach I adopt throughout these volumes is designed to safeguard the distinct place and space of Christian theology, while at the same time accentuating its intrinsic capacity to connect up with other disciplines. Theology is conceived as an intellectually robust discipline, offering Christians a vantage point from which they may explore and engage the world around them, making sense of what they observe, and offering points of contact for significant conversations and interactions. Intellectual timidity, modesty or sheer laziness must be set to one side, in order to bring Christian perspectives to bear on the many facets of the human situation. Although my approach focuses on the natural sciences, it has the capacity to relate to other disciplines. Although my approach is resolutely evangelical in orientation, I suspect that most orthodox Christians will find themselves able to relate to and identify with much of what I pro-

pose, even if they may feel the need to develop it in certain directions for their own purposes. It is my hope that it will offer a catalyst and resource to evangelical intellectual and cultural engagement, and not merely with the world of the natural sciences.

The approach I set out offers theology the opportunity to engage with the world, without being obligated to capitulate to that world as a precondition of such an engagement. Although rigorously grounded in the Christian tradition, it possesses a capacity to address issues far beyond the community of faith. A scientific theology offers an integrationist worldview, which allows faith to be brought to bear on other activities – such as the teaching and practice of the natural sciences. It remains to be seen how useful and productive this aspect of a scientific theology might be. Nevertheless, it is a characteristic feature of its approach, which distinguishes it from many of its rivals in the contemporary theological marketplace.

The arrangement and leading arguments of the three volumes of ‘a scientific theology’ can be summarized as follows:<sup>6</sup>

*Nature.* This opening volume clarifies the general position to be adopted, setting out the basic themes of a scientific theology (part 1), before moving on to a detailed engagement with the concept of “nature,” which is of such decisive importance in any discussion of the relation of the natural sciences and theology (part

This ground-clearing volume reads a little slowly at points: before a positive theological approach may be developed, it is necessary to clear away some alternative approaches about which I have serious misgivings. The most important of these is the notion that theology can proceed by a direct appeal to the concept of “nature” as a foundational resource or normative concept.

“Nature” is often treated as a fundamental resource for theology, on the basis of the assumption that it is an unmediated and uninterpreted concept. Yet there is a growing and settled view that the concept of “nature” actually represents a socially mediated construct. Nature is thus to be viewed as an interpreted notion, which is unusually vulnerable to the challenge of deconstruction. The implications of this for a “theology of nature” are explored, with special reference to the Christian understanding of nature as creation. This leads into the purpose and place of natural theology within the framework of the approach adopted.

*Reality.* The second volume deals with the issue of realism in science and theology (part 3), and sets out both a critique of anti- and non-realism, and a positive statement of a realist position. A scientific theology conceives

the theological enterprise as a principled attempt to give an account of the reality of God, which it understands to be embedded at different levels in the world. A scientific theology approaches such questions in the light of what is actually known about God. It is an *a posteriori* discipline, responding to and offering an account of what may be known of God through revelation, taking full account of the stratified nature of that knowledge of God. This volume develops, for the first time, the theological potential of the program of “critical realism” developed in the writings of Roy Bhaskar, which has considerable potential for Christian theology in general, and for the interaction of that theology and the natural sciences in particular.

*Theory.* The third and final volume in the series deals with the manner in which reality is represented, paying special attention to the parallels between theological doctrines and scientific theories (part 4). This volume considers the origin, development and reception of such doctrines and theories, and notes the important parallels between the scientific and theological communities in these important matters. It offers a sustained defense of the necessity of doctrine within Christian theology against those who argue for a “non-dogmatic” Christianity. The approach developed within this volume builds on the theoretical insights of writers such as Martin Heidegger and Jürgen Habermas, and argues that theory is to be conceived in terms of the *communal beholding of reality*.

The Christian community thus finds itself under an intellectual obligation to give an account of what it corporately “beholds.” Theory is thus understood primarily as a response to an experienced reality. The many theoretical issues to be addressed in this volume include the manner in which closure is secured in theological theorizing, the problem of reductionism in theoretical analysis, the explanatory dimensions of theology, the implications of the stratification of reality for its representation, the place of metaphysics in Christian theology, and the nature of revelation itself.

In bringing these three volumes to a close, I found myself increasingly convinced of the truth of Iris Murdoch’s comment that “every book is the wreck of a perfect idea.”<sup>7</sup> Bringing this work to an end turned out to be both a relief and a matter of some frustration. The process of unfolding what seemed like a bright idea back in 1976 proved to be far more difficult than I had imagined, and its execution less satisfactory than I had hoped. Initially, it seemed to me that the vast spaciousness afforded by these three volumes would be more than adequate to deal with the issues I knew had to be addressed

in articulating a coherent and plausible vision of “a scientific theology.” My frustration is partly due to the obvious fact that this has turned out to be signally less than adequate for my purposes. What I had hoped might be extensive discussions of central methodological questions have ended up being rather shallow; what I had hoped to be close readings of seminal texts seems to have turned out to be little more than superficial engagements. To use an image that may be familiar to readers of sixteenth-century Spanish spiritual writers, I have carried out some explorations in the foothills of Mount Carmel but have yet to ascend it.

So where do these three volumes take us? What future agenda do they set? I am clear that I shall have to await detailed scrutiny of my proposals at the hands of my peers before moving on to develop them further. However, both those processes are already under way. I can therefore sketch out what I think will be the likely future development of the scientific theology.

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As I stressed earlier, a scientific theology is a system rather than a loose collage of ideas. It offers a coherent vision of reality and the manners in which it can be known and represented. It offers a “big-picture” approach to the entire theological enterprise, which transcends the somewhat limited field of science-and-religion studies and embraces the questions traditionally associated with systematic theology as a whole. This means that it is capable of being applied to detailed, small-scale theological questions, as well as to the great themes of classic dogmatics, from Aquinas through to Barth. I believe that, precisely because it is a coherent system, a scientific theology is capable of operating at both the microtheological and macrotheological levels.

The next two projects I expect to publish are microtheological, aimed at applying the method to very well defined concerns, which have proved intractable on the basis of previous approaches. These will aim to explore the intellectual fecundity and theological utility of the project by considering two specific and highly focused issues, in which the method adopted in these volumes has already been identified as having genuine

potential. I set out both these projects, and offer an interim report on their viability, in the final volume, *Theory*. These two future projects take the following forms:

The first is a study on the development of doctrine, which will avoid the weaknesses of traditional approaches, both historical and theoretical, by exploring the parallels between the related processes of theoretical development in the natural sciences, and doctrinal development in Christian history. In particular, I shall be using Otto von Neurath’s image of a “ship at sea” as a model of the *ecclesia in via*, as it attempts to consolidate its grasp of its own doctrinal heritage. I have already begun to develop this model, and I provided an interim report on its theological potential (3:214-21). However, it remains to be developed more fully, set against the broadest background of Christian doctrinal reflection, covering every period of Christian history and as many aspects of that history as is practicable within the limits of a monograph.

The second is a monograph aiming to revalidate the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy, once more avoiding the weaknesses of existing historical and theoretical models. This approach rests on the critically important notion of “reception theory,” which offers an account of the complex factors – both intellectual and cultural – that influence the manner in which theories are evaluated and appropriated. These can be seen in the manner in which both scientific theories, such as Copernicanism and Darwinism, and new Christian doctrinal developments were “received” after their development. The concept of “underdetermination” – including the issue of the “empirical fit” of theory and evidence – will play a key role in this process.

As noted earlier, these represent highly focussed and specific microtheological applications of the method. Both will be scholarly works, characterised by an extensive and sustained engagement with primary and secondary sources. Yet my preliminary research on the macrotheological application of the approach has been equally encouraging. The ultimate goal of the scientific theology project is a set of (probably three) volumes with the overall working title *A Scientific Dogmatics*. As the title indicates, this will be a work of positive theology, based on the actualization of the approaches set out in the trilogy.

Yet this will not be a dogmatics, as traditionally conceived – that is, as an exploration of the interconnectedness of ideas, and *ideas* alone. Faithful to the form of critical realism that underlies the scientific theology project, these works will engage with the various strata at which theological ideas are embedded. They will deal with themes traditionally seen as peripheral to the theological

enterprise, yet which a critical realism demands be embraced as part of its legitimate task. A purely notional apprehension of Christian dogmatics will be set to one side, to allow a proper apprehension of its themes to be developed. It is impossible to undertake a critical realist

***The Christian community thus finds itself under an intellectual obligation to give an account of what it corporately "beholds."***

dogmatics without addressing such issues as spirituality, apologetics, preaching, pastoral care, worship and prayer. Although evangelical in its foundation and orientation, the work will be of considerable interest to Christians of all traditions.

One of my concerns, for example, will be to develop a “creation spirituality” which will affirm the role of the created order in devotion and contemplation, while avoiding the theological shortcomings of Matthew Fox’s approach. Another will be to develop the significance of Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of tradition-constituted rationality for an ecclesiology, which will see the church as a community of ideas and values, similar to the *polis* of ancient Greece.<sup>8</sup> Above all, these works will seek to convey the immensity of the Christian vision of God – what John Donne described as the “exceeding weight of eternal glory”<sup>9</sup> – and its impact on the intellectual, spiritual and prayerful practice of the Christian faith.

That, however, lies in the future. It is at present the far horizon of the scientific theology project, with much work to be done during the interim. The enterprise of Christian theology is like civilization itself, characterized by Arnold Toynbee as “a movement and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor.” I do not for one moment imagine that the scientific theology project will settle anything. But it might make that voyage of faith more interesting, and make sense of some of the enigmas we encounter along the way.



## NOTES

1. Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.
2. Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*. Vol. 1.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, xi.

3. Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. Alister McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

4. See Alister McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition” in John G. Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, 139-58.

5. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

6. Alister McGrath *A Scientific Theology*. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001-3.

7. Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*. London: Vintage, 1999, 172.

8. This idea has already been explored to some extent in Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. It needs much more rigorous application.

9. John Donne, ‘Sermon No. 1’, in *The Sermons of John Donne*, edited E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter. 10 vols. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954, vol. 7, 51-71.

# Calling Pastor-Theologians: Prospects, Challenges

by Dr. John P. Burgess

**T**heologian Stanley Hauerwas begins his book *Unleashing the Scripture* with a provocative assertion:

No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth-grade commencements. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.<sup>1</sup>

One might argue in similar if less provocative manner that the church should also take decisions about call to ministry out of the hands of individuals. No more should people come to the church and say, "I feel called to the ministry." No more should anyone who has graduated from college and poses no imminent danger to society be able to self-select himself or herself into seminary. Rather, call to ministry should be God's call to ministry through the church. Ministry should be a matter of what the church needs in order to be the church.

But, as Hauerwas acknowledges, the church itself can be possessed by bad habits that hinder it from rightly discerning God's will for its life. In his estimation, we will not be able to read the Scriptures with understanding (or to worship rightly, or to participate in the eucharist with integrity) unless we are a people who have been shaped by the way of Jesus and his practice of confession and forgiveness, hospitality and peaceableness. Similarly, one might argue that the church will be unable rightly to authorize call to ministry unless it is clear about its own nature and purpose, and therefore about the nature and purpose of its ministry.

Yet, it is precisely the question of the church that finds no adequate answer in today's ecclesiastical world. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow has noted, North American religion is in a time of restructuring.<sup>2</sup> People continue to profess belief in God but are suspicious of church doctrine. They pray more than ever but distance themselves from other traditional religious practices. They devour books about the spiritual life but

are ambivalent about practicing it with others. They do not feel beholden to religious traditions and institutions but, rather, pick and choose beliefs and practices that work for them.

North Americans want to be spiritual, without being religious. They seek religious resources that offer them healing and renewal and a sense of personal affirmation, but are not ready to commit themselves to a disciplined way of life in a community of faith. They are spiritual nomads, closely guarding their freedom to wander in and out of religious communities, even as they long for a sense of community, a place in which they will feel valued and supported in their personal journey.

This stance has vast implications for the church. Almost inevitably, religious communities come to think of themselves as part of a "spiritual marketplace" in which they must compete for customers.<sup>3</sup> In such a world, the key issue for people in ministry or considering ministry becomes that of identity. Just what is it that a minister is supposed to be or to do? Which expectations are right and reasonable, which are more peripheral? Where should the minister focus his or her time? How does the minister sort out just what his or her call is, when the implicit answer always is, "Whatever the market requires of you"?

A church that is not sure of its own identity conveys a baffling range of images of ministry to its ministers and candidates for ministry. Consider the pastoral activities to which persons in my denomination (the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.]) are asked to respond when seeking a ministerial position—some twenty items, ranging from corporate worship to spiritual development of members to counseling, evangelism, planning congregational life, ecumenical and interfaith activities, and administrative leadership. A candidate can (and is implicitly encouraged to) circle eight of these activities as having highest priority. Eight priorities simultaneously? Is it any wonder that too many pastors wonder how they can do it all and whether any of it matters in the end?

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A look at the ads that congregations place when they have a ministerial opening is equally revealing.<sup>4</sup> B. Presbyterian Church is “looking for: a pastor to excite our congregation . . . a pastor with strengths in

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preaching, pastoral care, and family ministry who will appeal to youth and children.” K. Presbyterian Church seeks “an engaging preacher . . . a compassionate leader, a good communicator, a strong administrator, and a self-motivated, friendly person who can challenge and nurture people of all ages.” Says another ad, “Our small, growing, interdenominational church . . . needs a full-time minister who is a vibrant and versatile spiritual leader . . . [and] who will nurture and attend to one-on-one needs of the congregation, exhibit a strong visibility in the congregation, and develop an active youth program.” Or another, “We seek a creative team player, theologically in the center of the PC(USA), who enjoys life and is fun to be around.” Pastors are supposed to be all things to all people, ready and able to attend to every need that come down the pike, always with a smile on their face and with nary a discouraging word.

What would it take for the church to get clear about its identity and therefore about call to ministry? The church in the Reformed tradition is best understood as a school of piety. In response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ, the church has as its purpose the awakening, cultivating, and exercising of what Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22). As Jonathan Edwards could write, “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections...[i.e., in] vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will.”<sup>5</sup> While Edwards and other Reformed theologians rejected the emotional excesses of the revivals, they nevertheless insisted that religion was a matter as much of the heart as of the head. By Word, sacrament, and disciplined life together, the church seeks to shape people’s deepest dispositions,

and these dispositions serve as springs of transformed moral activity. In the church, people learn to grow, however slowly and incompletely, into more trusting relationship with God and with each other. They learn to practice their faith—i.e., to make it a way of life, and to exercise and strengthen it.

While right belief cannot replace these dispositions and practices, it does play a critical role in shaping them. One of the historic principles of church order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states that

truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness . . . And no opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it of no consequence what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.<sup>6</sup>

In his discussion of the church in Book IV of the *Institutes*, John Calvin speaks of doctrine as the very soul of the church.<sup>7</sup> “The church is called to be the faithful keeper of God’s truth . . . For by its ministry and labor God . . . feeds us with spiritual food and provides everything that makes for our salvation.”<sup>8</sup> In faithfully proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments, the church sets forth God’s truth and shapes itself as a peculiar people who not only grasp this truth intellectually but also take it to heart. As Calvin puts it in his famous definition of faith, God calls us to “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

God’s truth is existential truth—i.e., truth for us (Luther’s pro nobis). It is truth that cuts us to the quick and shows us who we really are—lonely and lost, yet loved by God. In Calvin’s thinking, the pastor plays a key role in promulgating this truth, hence, the tradition in American Presbyterian churches of referring to the minister as a teaching elder. As Calvin says, “Nothing fosters mutual love more fittingly than for men to be bound together with this one bond: one is appointed pastor to teach the rest, and those bidden to be pupils receive the common teaching from one mouth.”<sup>10</sup> (And note in the Reformed tradition the key role also of ruling elders who take regular measure of the congregation’s growth in piety.)

But if the goal of the church is not simply dissemi-

nation of information about God but proclamation of life-changing truth from God, the minister is not so much the academic expert who confronts the community of faith from without, but the prophet and pastor whom the community raises up from within. The minister is the one charged by the community of faith to remind it of the most difficult questions of life and death, and therefore of its existence before God. On behalf of the community, the minister will ask again and again how its members (and those beyond the church, as well) might come to have their lives reoriented by and towards the living God.

In this school of piety, the minister must be a pastor-theologian. As theologian, the minister represents the theological tradition and its efforts to hear the Scriptures faithfully. The church needs the best thinking of the past, those insights that have proven to be of enduring value in reorienting people's lives towards God. As pastor-theologian, however, the minister understands that the Scriptures and the theological tradition must speak into people's lives today. God's truth can be true for them only if they develop the capacity

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to hear God's living Word for themselves and on behalf of the community of faith. The pastor-theologian leads people in making connections between belief and practice, between the wisdom of the past and the practice of a living piety in the present. The pastor-theologian is not only an authority but an authorizer—i.e., one who authoritatively directs the church to be the church, the community that listens faithfully for God's living Word and lives it out in transformed dispositions and practices.

Call to ministry thus involves the church in a process of discerning who is called to serve as a pastor-theologian and how such persons can be rightly guided and encouraged—and the church will be capable of such discernment only to the degree that its own life is deeply shaped by a pastoral, theological discourse that is oriented by Scripture and the theological tradition,

and in which every member of the church engages. Ministers themselves play the key role in shaping this kind of ecclesiastical culture.

Ministers, however, can play this role only if they are alive theologically and remain challenged in their thinking. They must always be making connections anew between belief and practice in their own lives, and must be engaged continually in prayer, theological reflection, and practices of piety, both by themselves individually and among themselves corporately. Even as they seek to lead the community of faith to fulfill its theological vocation, they need a sense of being supported in their own theological vocation—and not only by the congregations that they serve but also by the church's larger institutional structures. The church that authorizes their call must also provide for them to gather with their colleagues in ministry for mutual encouragement in piety and theological reflection.

These colleagues will be first of all other ministers. In Geneva, Calvin began the Venerable Company of Pastors to meet weekly for study of Scripture and theological reflection and debate.

The Venerable Company of Pastors was a disciplined community. Its meetings were more than conversations about abstractions, for their purpose was to encourage pastors to grow in love of God and thereby to grow in faith, hope, and love of neighbors. All of this was for the sake of the gospel—its proclamation, reception, and fulfillment throughout God's creation.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany organized theological convents. Ministers in a given geographic area would regularly meet for prayer and theological reflection, in order to remain firmly rooted in their Christian and ministerial identity during a time of great turmoil and danger. No less today do ministers need to gather with each other in covenant communities, in which they can practice their core identity as pastor-theologians and can learn to resist the cultural pressures to become mere ecclesiastical service-providers.

These communities of mutual encouragement and accountability would be furthered strengthened if pastors met not only among themselves but also with judicatory officials and seminary teachers. In the Reformed tradition, the church's teaching office belongs to all three of these parties. Seminary professors are not beholden simply to the academic guild; they teach to and on behalf of the church. Judicatory officials are more than bureaucratic administrators; they teach the larger church through the resources that they prepare,

the initiatives that they sponsor, and the positions that they take on behalf of the church. Together, ministers, seminary professors, and judicatory officials need to strengthen each other in their identity as theologians of and on behalf of the church if the church as a whole is to observe its theological vocation.

Ministers, seminary professors, and judicatory officials all play key role in preparing candidates for ministry and authorizing their call. They meet regularly with candidates and with each other to ensure that can-

**God's truth ...is truth that cuts us to the quick and shows us who we really are—lonely and lost, yet loved by God.**

didates fulfill various requirements. How might these representatives of the church's teaching office be strengthened in their own theological identity and in their capacity to transmit this identity if they gathered together not only for business but also for sustained theological reflection among themselves?

If the church wants to think clearly about call to ministry, it must recover clarity about its own life as a school of piety, in which attention to the church's inherited faith leads people to a deeper capacity to think theologically about belief and practice. As a school of piety, the church needs ministers who have the gifts and preparation to serve as skilled pastor-theologians. Only an ecclesiastical culture in which ministers, seminary professors, and judicatory officials recover their shared teaching office can ensure that women and men are called into ministry not simply because they claim a secret call of God, but because the church has called them publicly to the pastoral-theological work of Word, sacrament, and the shaping of life together.

Let the church from now on call people into ministry who have one clear purpose: to be better theologians than their seminary professors, to be better shapers of church life than any judicatory official, and to do these things with a pastoral sensitivity and wisdom that can teach seminary professors and judicatory officials alike.

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#### **NOTES**

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.
2. See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
3. The term is borrowed from Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
4. See *The Presbyterian Outlook* 184 (Sept. 30, 2002): 22-23.
5. Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 141.
6. *Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2002), G-1.0304.
7. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1230 (4.12.1).
8. Ibid., 1024 (4.1.10).
9. Ibid., 551 (3.2.7).
10. Ibid., 1054 (4.3.1).
11. Joseph D. Small, "A Company of Pastors," in *The Day Book: Company of Pastors* (Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2002).
12. See Richard Robert Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).



# The Priesthood of All Believers:

## Breaking Historical Groundwork on the Biblical Concept

By Christina M. Busman

**M**artin Luther is often acclaimed and remembered for his strong opinions on theological concepts such as the will, the law, and grace, but underlying these doctrinal convictions lies his firm commitment to the body of Christ, in which the gospel is present and active. At the same time, Luther's ideas concerning the church are laden with complexity due to both their intermittent placement throughout Luther's polemical writings and the multifaceted nature of the church itself. The focus of this essay will be on one particular ecumenical notion held by the German reformer, that of the priesthood of all believers, a doctrine that appears first in his early writings and subsequently serves as a foundation throughout his life. I will begin by addressing the context of Luther's writing and continue by exploring the definition and biblical derivation of this doctrine. Next, both the privileges and responsibilities Luther saw to be entailed in the priesthood of all believers will be discussed. Finally, I will look at some of the contemporary applications of Luther's conception of this doctrine.

### Authority in Luther's Context

An essential component of Luther's vocation was an undying goal to restore the true church and Christendom. In his attempt "to recover the redemptive role of Christ at the center of faith," Luther's writings were often unapologetically reactionary against the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> A former Monk, he believed the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church to be antithetical to the biblical text. In reply to a Roman Catholic opponent Jerome Emser, who found the strength of his own argument in the writings of the church fathers, Luther notes:

But you know very well that when you drag in by the hair some passages of the fathers to apply to your dreams, it does not move me at all. Even if they agreed with you, it is not enough. I want to have Holy Scripture because I fight against you with Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

The Word, functioning as the primary standard of truth

for Luther, overrides any human authority, past or present.

Moreover, the protestant reformer viewed the systemic authority that the pope, bishops and priests demanded as a worldly notion, originating from the devil himself. In explaining this perspective Bernhard Lohse notes, "Luther was breaking here with the medieval idea of the hierarchy of estates, according to which the spiritual is above the temporal, with the pope at the apex. By contrast, he emphasized the independence of the temporal estate, which has its own task from God, and in fulfilling it need not be obedient to the spiritual state."<sup>3</sup> Within the spiritual state and through the saving work of Christ, Luther came to believe that all members of the church carry the title "priest." From the authority within the Catholic Church, such an idea provoked a harsh response, which Luther interpreted as an attempt to defend the church's corrupted structure.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite the risks associated with ecclesiastical disagreement in this context laden with controversy, Luther confidently purports the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

### The Origin of the Priesthood of All Believers

Martin Luther's understanding of the Christian community as being composed of many priests stems from a Christocentric focus prevalent throughout his theology with the foremost, defining quality of the priesthood being founded in Christ, the true and ultimate priest. In his "Treatise on the New Testament," Luther urges his readers "not to doubt that Christ in heaven is our priest, that he offers himself for us without ceasing, and presents us and our prayer and praise, making all these acceptable....For all those who have the faith that Christ is a priest for them in heaven before God, and who lay on him their prayers and praise, their need and their whole selves, presenting them through him, not doubting that he does this very thing, and offers himself for them – these people take the sacrament and testament, outwardly or spiritually, as a token of all this, and do not

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doubt that all sin is there forgiven, that God has become their gracious Father, and that everlasting life is prepared for them.”<sup>5</sup> In accepting such words, Christians could be confident that an intermediary would be unnecessary to secure this absolution.

Elsewhere, in emphasizing this same Christocentric focus, Luther highlights Christ’s unique role by citing relevant biblical text:

Christ...has sacrificed himself for us and all of us with him. Peter speaks of this in I Pet. 3 [:18]: “Christ died once for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us – dead in the flesh but alive in the spirit – to God.” And Heb. 10 [:14] says: “For by a single offering he has finished and perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”<sup>6</sup>

Through the crucifixion and resurrection Christ conquered death and sin, thus restoring humanity to God. Serving as the sole mediator, the Savior alone is worthy of the title “high priest.”

According to Luther, identification with Christ in this superior role comes through faith alone and “permits no one else to take its place. Therefore all Christian men are priests, all women priestesses, be they young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned.”<sup>7</sup> Christ, the object of our faith, does not favor a particular race, gender, or select portion of the church.<sup>8</sup> Through this faith the Christian is

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saved, justified, and becomes the recipient of the promises of the Word. “God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing....No good work can rely upon the Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

Luther identifies this quintessential faith as being present in baptism. He declares, “Consequently every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man, but because Christ Himself has begotten him as a priest and

has given birth to him in baptism.”<sup>10</sup> This priestly title and baptism do not need renewal but are concurrent with the enduring promises of God.<sup>11</sup> At the same time it must be noted that baptism itself “justifies nobody, and gives advantage to nobody; rather, faith in the word of the promise to which baptism was conjoined, is what justifies, and so completes, that which the baptism signified.”<sup>12</sup> It is in faith through baptism that the grace, mercy and redemptive power of Christ, the High Priest, washes over the believer and brings new life; and it is only through this faith in Christ that an individual becomes a priest.

Luther further describes the derivation of the priesthood of all believers, that is, the sharing and transfer of role and function from Christ to the church, in two different but related ways – first, as children of the High Priest and second as brothers and sisters of Christ.<sup>13</sup> For the reformer, the hereditary notion of the priesthood is grounded in the priestly line of Melchizedek. In the tradition of this non-Hebraic priest, unlike the Levitical priests, Christ perfectly fulfilled the office of the priesthood by bringing God’s message, in serving as a sacrifice, and through prayer.<sup>14</sup> In further describing the nature of this lineage, specifically in reference to Psalm 110, Luther notes:

This priesthood does not let itself be made or ordered. Here is no manufactured priest; he must be born priest and as heir bring it along from birth. But I mean the new birth, of water and Spirit; there all Christians become such priests, the highest Priest’s children and joint heirs.<sup>15</sup>

In Luther’s context, this familial identification was a comfort and confirmation to the renegade church in that it allowed them to continually live in this relationship of reconciliation and follow Christ’s example.<sup>16</sup>

In a complementary manner, in light of Psalm 22:22 and Matthew 12:50, Luther views priests as siblings of the highest Priest.<sup>17</sup> The priesthood of Christians proceeds from the priesthood of their brother, who commissioned his sisters and brothers, that is, all who believe in him, to the office of the priesthood. Being a priest then, is synonymous with being a Christian, a follower of the eternal salvific Priest.<sup>18</sup>

According to Luther, it is through these two relational connections that “we offer ourselves, our need, prayer, praise, and thanksgiving in Christ and through Christ; and thereby we offer Christ to God, that is, we move Christ and give him occasion to offer himself for us and to offer us with himself.”<sup>19</sup> Christ is the sacrifi-

cial intercessor on behalf of humanity.<sup>20</sup> Also, it is here that Christians receive the same power that was in Christ; all that is his now belongs to the members of the priesthood. Yet this acquisition is not a right nor is this feat of transferal possible for any mere human. In Luther's commentary on Psalm 110, the notion of Christ's incomparable role most clear:

He is the only one, and He must be the only one, who brings us to God by His priestly office and shares the office with us. Just as we are all comforted and saved by the power of His priestly office, so all who are saved share in it, not merely St. Peter and the apostles, or the pope and the bishops. He also bestows the title upon all Christians. As they are called God's children and heirs for His sake, so they are called priests after Him. Every baptized Christian is, and ought to be, called a priest, just as much as St. Peter or St. Paul. St. Peter was a priest because he believed in Christ. I am a priest for the same reason.<sup>21</sup>

Christ alone is the hope and salvation for humanity. Any leader of the church who attempts to fulfill this role is a hindrance to fellow believers. In addition, anyone who claims that this priestly role can be earned or granted by papist authority is defiling the church and the Word itself.

### Ministers in the Priesthood

By some theological and ecumenical contemporaries and predecessors, Luther is accused of being untrue to the original notion of the priesthood of all believers which he set forth early in his life.<sup>22</sup> These critics claim that with the establishment of authority positions in the German evangelical church, Luther compromised the integrity of the doctrine itself. While it is true that Luther does not discuss the notion of the priesthood at length in his later work, a more likely conception of his shift in focus can be configured. As aforementioned, Luther's writing was often reactionary in nature, and thus, in encountering the practical implications of this doctrine, the need for structure within the concept of priesthood became apparent. In no way does Luther reject his earlier statements concerning the priesthood of all believers, but instead out of necessity this doctrine takes on a more holistic form. It is from this understanding of Luther that his position on the role of ministers in the church as commissioned servants in the priesthood of all believers will be presented.

From the outset it is important to note that Luther is

firmly committed to the scriptural notion of "one spiritual priesthood." At the same time, he recognizes that some individuals are called to serve others in the priesthood in a formal sense. Speaking in response to Emser, Luther emphasizes the biblical foundation of this voca-

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concept of passive Christianity."***

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tional distinction: "Scripture makes all of us equal priests, as has been said, but the churchly priesthood which we now separate from laymen in the whole world and which alone we call priesthood, is called 'ministry' [ministerium], 'servitude' [servitus], 'dispensation' [dispensatio], 'episcopate' [episcopatus], and 'presbytery' [presbyterium] in Scripture. Nowhere is it called 'priesthood' [sacerdotium] or 'spiritual' [spiritualis]."<sup>23</sup> Thus the notion that the priesthood was somehow transferred only to the pope and his company is not legitimately founded. The "royal priesthood" discussed in I Peter 2:9 refers to all Christians in all places, both laity and those in church leadership.<sup>25</sup>

When a priest does assume the role of minister, that person is not elevated to another level of Christian identification. All Christians, ministers and laity, belong to the same priesthood, affirm the same gospel, receive the same baptism and are united in the same faith.<sup>26</sup> In response to the dichotomy found in the Roman Catholic church Luther asseverates: "Christ has not two bodies, nor two kinds of body, one secular and the other religious. He has one head and one body."<sup>27</sup> Thus while being extremely important, it must be remembered that the ministerial position is only one aspect of the body of Christ discussed in Romans 12:3-8.<sup>28</sup> According to the reformer, "The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the entire congregation, all the members of which are priests."<sup>29</sup> Although this role may be functionally different than other aspects of the body, all members must work together in order to fulfill both their corporate and individual duties, which are both critical, priestly aspects of the mission of the church.

Whoever is called to the service of minister is divinely chosen as such after becoming a priest. In

other words, through baptism one is not born a presbyter or minister but instead a priest, and after the sacramental act the individual is then commissioned to a specific role in the body. In speaking of those called to ministerial service, Luther further illustrates the process of appointment:

Such people are to be chosen by the church only for the sake of the office. They are to be separated from the common mass of Christians in the same way as in secular government, where certain people of the citizenry or municipality are chosen and appointed as officials. One does not become a citizen by being elected burgomaster or judge, but one is elected to the office because one already possesses citizenship with him into his office...The office does not make the man; but a man must have the necessary qualifications, either by birth or training, before he fills the office. It is in accordance with God's creation that we must first be born as human beings, men or women; thereafter He assigns to each his office or position as He will.<sup>30</sup>

The first and foremost mark of all Christians, ministers and laity, is their priesthood. Despite shifting roles or titles in the church, the priesthood of all believers

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#### **Privileges and Responsibilities of the Priesthood**

The priesthood of all believers, as envisioned by Martin Luther, is an active vocation that includes an inseparable combination of privileges and responsibilities, both personal and corporate. For example, according to Hebrews 4:16, the priest has unmediated access to God and may "approach the throne of grace with boldness..." Luther proclaims, "This is the great honor which belongs to Christians: He has anointed us and

made us worthy, so that we may appear before God in prayer."<sup>31</sup> With Christ as High Priest, the service of the Catholic priest as human mediator is not necessary for the Christian.

Furthermore, it is not only the responsibility of those in the priesthood to approach the throne of God in prayer for fellow believers but also to love and serve them. All members of the body of Christ function in some sense as priests for their neighbors. In discussing Luther's understanding of the priestly role, Paul Avis asserts:

The pastoral character of the universal priesthood is supreme. Any Christian can represent Christ to administer spiritual counsel to a brother or sister. All Christians are permitted 'most freely to hear the confession of secret sins, so that the sinner may make his sins known to whomever he will and seek pardon and comfort, that is, the word of Christ, by the mouth of his neighbor' (LW, 36, p. 88). Luther recommends that you go first to a priest, but 'only because he is a brother and a Christian' (WA, 8, p. 184). The office of priesthood, which is every Christian's birthright, is thus one of mutual service, counsel and comfort in which the gospel is shared among Christians according to their various needs and troubles.<sup>32</sup>

This notion of confessing sins to fellow sisters and brothers does not negate or lessen the individual priest's right and need to seek the forgiveness of God directly as some critics have suggested.<sup>33</sup> Instead, Luther is emphasizing the necessary, communal nature of Christianity and remaining aware of the benefits of accountability in the life of the priest.

In addition, all members of the priesthood are teachers of the Gospel. In reference to Psalm 51:13, the reformer avers, "Here again it is certain that a Christian not only has the right and power to teach but has the duty to do so on pain of losing his soul and of God's disfavor."<sup>34</sup> Luther expounds on two primary ways in which this teaching occurs. First, if the priests are among non-Christians it is their duty of love to preach and teach the gospel to them.<sup>35</sup> Second, if there is a need in the congregational setting for the Word to be preached, each priest should be willing to be chosen; but at the same time, all believers in this setting should not assert themselves among their fellow believers.<sup>36</sup> It is the duty of the congregation, the united priests, to both participate in the decision of who will be their minister and judge the content of the teaching of those placed by

God before them to preach.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the call to proclaim the gospel applies to all followers of Christ, but each must discern in what context he or she is to honor this command.

A final privilege and responsibility all Christians possess due to their place in the priestly order concerns the capability of performing sacramental duties. In his 1523 treatise "Concerning the Ministry," Luther writes against the papists who monopolize the priestly rights and explicates the specific modes of operation for the priesthood.<sup>38</sup> For example, Luther sees an act such as the baptizing of an infant by a midwife in an emergency situation as not merely "a private act" but a "part of the public ministry of the church which belongs only to the priesthood."<sup>39</sup> When a baptism is needed and the one chosen by the congregation to regularly perform such acts – that is, the minister – is not available it is the duty of another priest to respond.

It is important to note that with his notions of the priesthood of all believers Luther is not promoting chaos and anarchy in the church or denying the need for official ministers. Although all priests have God-given authority, "no one makes use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. For what is the common property of all no individual may arrogate to himself."<sup>40</sup> One of Luther's clearest defenses of ordained pastors is found in his commentary on the 110th Psalm:

But above these activities is the communal office of public teaching. For this preachers and pastors are necessary. This office cannot be attended to by all the members of a congregation. Neither is it fitting that each household do its own baptizing and celebrating of the Sacrament. Hence it is necessary to select and ordain those who can preach and teach, who study Scriptures, and who are able to defend them. They deal with the Sacraments by the authority of the congregation, so that it is possible to know who is baptized and everything is done in an orderly fashion. If everyone were to preach to his neighbor or if they did things for one another without orderly procedure, it would take a long time indeed to establish a congregation. Such functions, however, do not pertain to the priesthood as such but belong to the public office which is performed in behalf of all those who are priests, that is, Christians.<sup>41</sup>

Luther recognizes the potential for disorganization and disunity in the church, should all priests continually access the latent duties and privileges of the priesthood.

The position of priesthood carries with it much power;<sup>42</sup> it is thus necessary that all priests understand this and use discernment as they follow the example of the High Priest.

#### **Contemporary Application**

Although the society in which Luther penned his thoughts on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is markedly different than contemporary Western

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culture, today's Christians can learn much from Luther's perspective. The priesthood – then and now – is a vocation that is to be fully embraced. Luther did not believe in nominal or casual Christianity. Everyday and everywhere the believer is a priest, and the privileges and responsibilities aforementioned cannot be pilfered through and selected at will. There always needs to be willingness and sensitivity present in the Christian heart to serve wherever called. In many contemporary, evangelical churches believers often over-emphasize the unmediated relationship with God that is available to all Christians through the priesthood. There is a high demand for "spirituality" in today's culture but often not a willingness to open oneself up to others. For example, the act of confessing sins to one another is not a common practice today, but a crucial aspect of the priesthood, in that it promotes the biblical concepts of accountability, freedom from sin, and community. God not only calls Christians to be in relationship with their Creator but also to be in relationship with fellow believers. We are all called to be pastors to each other, by regularly listening to, serving, communing with, and praying for those in our local congregation.

Furthermore, the priesthood of all believers stands antithetical to the concept of "passive Christianity." Each priest must be looking for the opportunity to serve others sacrificially. Selfishness and self-centeredness on the part of ministers stifles these gifts that are divinely imparted to all priests. In many instances in churches today, those in leadership positions have arrogated to

themselves too much power. The requirements for the position of priest do not include seminary training or several years of experience. Thus, ministers need to continually empower the congregation to serve. It is the

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responsibility of the identified leaders to continually bring the promises of the priesthood to the laity, lest those who are in leadership become like the papists of Luther's day.

Finally, many people today do not realize the radical nature of the priesthood. We are not merely granted direct access to God but are given the privilege of representing the Divine here on earth. Ergo the notion of the priesthood of all believers aids in the breaking down of walls that have been constructed in the church universal. For example, the priesthood unifies all Christians regardless of class, race, age, or gender. Hierarchy, prejudice and discrimination are antithetical to the very notion of the priesthood. Thus, this vocation to which all believers are called promotes the biblical proclamation of equality and oneness found in Galatians 3:28. It is the responsibility of the priests to not only reflect this paradigmatic concept but also to promote it in the larger culture. If we do indeed desire to follow our High Priest, despite the difficulties we will encounter, we must undertake this challenge.



#### NOTES

1. Scott Hendrix, "Luther's Theology," April 24, 2002.
2. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *American edition of Luther's Works* (hereafter LW) 39, p. 156.
3. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, p. 290.
4. See Luther's description and attack of the three walls of the Catholic Church (John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings*, pp. 406-

417).

5. *LW* 35, pp. 100-101.
6. *LW* 36, p. 138.
7. *LW* 35, p. 101.
8. Galatians 3:28.
9. John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings*, p. 58.
10. *LW* 13, p. 329.
11. John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings*, p. 302.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
13. *LW* 38, pp. 187-188.
14. *LW* 13, p. 315f.
15. Quoted in L.S. Spitz, "The Universal Priesthood of Believers with Luther's Comments," p.18.
16. *LW* 13, p. 321, 329. See also *LW* 36, p. 145f.
17. *LW* 38, p. 187.
18. *LW* 13, pp. 330-331.
19. *LW* 35, p. 102.
20. Romans 8:34.
21. *LW* 13, p. 330.
22. Luther's critics in this area were predominately the radical reformers and later radical pietists.
23. *LW* 39, p. 153.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 154. For a discussion of Luther's usage of this terminology in light of I Peter 2:5,9 see Bernhard Erling, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Luther's Translation of I Peter 2:5,9," pp. 20-29.
25. Jerome Emser on the other hand, argued that this biblical reference to priesthood actually referred to two types of priesthood: "first, to the spiritual priesthood which is common to all Christians; and second, to the 'outward' priesthood, as only the anointed and tonsured – that is, the ordained – priests are called" (*LW* 36, p. 141). Luther strongly disagreed with this biblical extortation, seeing it as an attempt to support the texts of church fathers and protect the structure of the Catholic church itself.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
28. Luther also illustrates this point with another biblical text: "For all Christians whatsoever really and truly belong to the religious class, and there is no difference among them except in so far as they do different work. That is St. Paul's meaning, in I Corinthians 12 [:12f.], when he says: 'We are all one body, yet each member hath his own work for serving others'" (John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings*, p. 407).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 332.
30. *LW* 13, pp. 331-332.

31. Ibid., p. 334.

32. Paul Avis, "Luther's Theology of the Church," p. 109.

33. For example, Herschel H. Hobbs in his criticism of Luther's view states, "Also his view that 'every Christian is someone else's priest, and we are all priests to one another' ignores the idea that every Christian has free access to God. It is my view that this denies the principle of the competency of the soul in religion" (*You Are Chosen: The Priesthood of All Believers*, p. 14). In light of Luther's section on Jesus as the one true priest in his commentary on the 110th Psalm, this seems to be an inaccurate interpretation of Luther's conception of the priestly functions and the relationship of the believer to God (LW 13, pp. 309-323).

34. LW 39, pp. 309-310.

35. Ibid., p. 310.

36. Ibid., p. 310.

37. Ibid., pp. 307, 312.

38. LW 40, p. 21f.

39. Ibid., p. 23. Here Luther also includes possible duties such as serving the bread and wine, binding and loosing sins, and sacrificing.

40. LW 36, p. 116.

41. LW 13, p. 334.

42. LW 39, pp. 310-311.

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# Theology as Spiritual Salvation

By Michael D. Langford

**I**t was a few weeks into my first semester at Princeton, when you still feel the exuberance to sit at meals with people you don't know. At my table one dinner, we did the customary introductions, providing our names and states of origin and vocational tracks. I explained that I was a transfer student; I had discovered a love of theology while taking classes part-time at Fuller, and had decided to come East in hopes that, among other things, Princeton would offer an opportunity for me to saturate myself in theological ferment.

"Oh, I hate theology," was the reply of a Southern belle sitting across the table. "It just seems so boring and needlessly complicated." Hmm. This was the sort of attitude that I had hoped to avoid at PTS.

But it isn't just the attitude of seminary students. I think that most Christians don't much like theology. Perhaps this is an offshoot of the secular view of theology, which is considered by the post-Christendom world as poetry at best, propaganda at worst. Perhaps it is a result of the endless bickering within the mainline denominations that, having embraced the postmodern vacuum of non-foundationalism, has created an ever-shifting canon of doctrine that is broad and shallow. Perhaps it is a result of the evangelical backlash that has tried to downplay what it deems to be too-intricate theology in an effort to "simply love Jesus."

Whatever the case, it seems that the Church has convinced its congregations of the irrelevance of theology (not to mention Scripture). How many students here have claimed that seminary is where they first learned of such elementary doctrines as the Atonement, or Christology, or the Trinity? How many Presbyterians have admitted that they had never before been aware of the tenants of a "Reformed faith," and knew little of John Calvin beyond what high school history classes had taught them? And of course, this theological naïveté is not limited to the descendants of Knox. The ecumenical movement has succeeded, and its legacy seems too often to be the generic "Christian" who not only is unaware of any theological heritage, but very likely is also certain that there is no need of any.

Most laugh away this doctrinal ignorance, even proudly acknowledging it. Why waste my time learning

the theological adiaphora of Luther and Augustine and Barth when it won't practically help me in my everyday life, and what's more, won't even help me in my faith? Many Christians see it all as unnecessary, perhaps in the same way that the average American would find it a waste of time to learn Kant or Plato or Descartes. And this attitude in the Church is no surprise when even seminarians seem often to want to learn enough theology merely to make it past the next test.

But I don't think that this is an unfortunate and merely regrettable consequence of the modern world. The theological ignorance in the Church today is seriously deadly. I think that it very likely is the result of an intentionally deadened spirituality, of a desperate internal attempt to avoid discomfort. And I think that no less than our salvation is at stake.

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In this essay, I hope to examine the absolute pertinence of theology to our actual ontology as Christians. First, I will venture an exploration of our aversion to the discipline of theology by way of Kierkegaardian hamartiology. Next, I will look into the soteriological reductionism indicated by the truncation of our theological lives. Finally, I want to suggest the need for pneumatological rejuvenation within our self-conception as a prescription of restoration of our intended salvation.

## Why?

Søren Kierkegaard hated the Danish church – not with the passion with which you might despise an ideological opponent, but with the sadness with which you might regard a perverted holiness. Kierkegaard saw the churchgoers of Denmark as self-congratulatory, comfort seeking and ignorant. Instead of striving toward the discipleship that God commands, his Lutheran compatriots ensconced themselves in a church that served to deepen their sins of pride and complacency. The Church ought to be a prophetic institution, anything but comfortable; it ought to help us as we struggle to stand as our true selves before God. Instead, Kierkegaard

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accused, the Church as it exists enables us to hide ourselves in the masses, never needing to stand up and take individual responsibility as one called by God to be a Christian.

Why does this happen? What causes us to slink away from our true mode of existence? In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard posits our nature as both finite and free, creaturely and transcendent. We are created, and therefore are limited and dependent. However, we are also special amongst all of creation, and have the capacity of freedom – we can transcend our creatureliness in thought and volition. But this duality causes us anxiety.

In a later book, *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard lays out a comprehensive account of our ontology in the face of anxiety. The self as “spirit” is the kinetic relation of our inherent opposites. It is not a Hegelian synthesis of the two ends of a dialectic, but rather is the relation in the act of relating. It is a dynamic ontology, never static. This kinetic orientation allows us to relate to others, and to God. However, our dynamic ontology also induces anxiety, or as Kierkegaard calls it in this later work, despair.

We contract the “sickness” of despair in the desire to flee from our kinetic ontology, seeking the stability of a static self. We reject our intended duality. Often, this manifests itself in “despairing ignorance,” where we are not even consciously aware of our dialectical nature. This Kierkegaard terms “spiritlessness.” However, our concern is with conscious despair, or our attempted flight from the dynamic self, for it is in this flight that despair leads to sin.

To be conscious of our nature indicates understanding ourselves as both finite and free. This duality is explained within Christianity by the anthropological doctrines of *creatio ex nihilo* and *imago Dei* – Christians are conscious of the fact that they are created by God, but created in the relationally self-transcendent image of God. Before God, the self gains what Kierkegaard calls “infinite reality,” and becomes a “theological self.” Thus when the Christian attempts in despair to flee from her intended dual image, she turns her back on her spiritual self to an infinite degree. She rebels against God’s intention. Despair conceives sin.

In our flight from despair, we deny one half of our dialectical self, and create an internal imbalance. Kierkegaard explains that sinful despair takes two forms – to will not to be the self, and to will to be the self. In willing not to be the self, we attempt to escape our inherent duality through the denial of our dynamism. In seeking stability, we reject the responsi-

bility of our freedom. This Kierkegaard terms “weakness”; in the truncation of our dialectic, we repudiate that which God has created us to be. On the other hand, in willing to be the self, we attempt to assert the self

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***A complete absence of subjectivism and individualism can leave us without any present experience of redemption.***

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through the misuse of our transcendence. Again in the search for security, we grant ourselves infinite ultimacy. This Kierkegaard calls “defiance”; in our self-assertion, we sever ourselves from God, the only true ground of the self.

In either case, through the abnormal emphasis of one end of our ontological dialectic, the spirit becomes malformed. We lose our kinetic nature. As a consequence, the inherent relationality connecting us to God and to others is handicapped. Our static ontology sinks us further into despair as we lose this vital spirituality. Ironically, the nature of our despair switches when before God. The “weak” sinner, in denial of her dual nature, will defiantly refuse to acknowledge that she is a sinner. The “defiant” sinner, in the infinite assertion of the self, will in weakness not understand how forgiveness is possible. Fortunately, Kierkegaard does not leave us in the gloom with which he is so often characterized. Though perhaps inevitable, sin is not necessary. It is a qualitative and not a quantitative leap from our intended state. However, through another qualitative leap, faith may emerge as a result of despair.

What does any of this have to do with our theological allergy? My contention is that the aversion to theology parallels Kierkegaardian despair. Theology is thought concerning God and the things of God, especially humanity. Theology is patent truth concerning ultimate reality, including our ontology. When we deny the centrality of those truths, when we fail to give them accord in our lives, we deny our own reality. Just as Kierkegaardian despair results in an attempt to flee from the anxiety of our dual nature, the denial of our theological self is analogous to willing not to be the self, or willing to be the self.

Some Christians simply attempt to ignore theological reality. These “weak theologians” will not be the theological self. In so doing, they deny the essentiality of the reality described by theology, refusing to recog-

nize their ontology – recognition available only in theological reflection. Weak theologians lack the courage or the discipline to embrace the arduous task of theology, to reflect upon the reality of God, and the consequences of this reality. On the other hand, some Christians assert that theology is minimally necessary, or even not necessary at all. These “defiant theologians” will to be a theological self, but they assert their own sense of self over that ontology given by God. They pick and choose theological reflection that is comfortable or pleasing to them, or label theology as a waste of time. Defiant theologians lack the humility or wisdom to reflect properly upon a reality far above and outside of themselves.

Why do we avoid theology? What is the source of the despair that pushes us to weakness or defiance? There is any number of reasons. Perhaps it is laziness, a reaction against the rigor of thought necessary. Perhaps it is fear, an aversion to the truths that lie underneath theological reflection – the attestation of sinfulness, the need of redemption, the sovereignty of God. Perhaps it is ignorance, a desire to leave unexplored that which might be disagreeable, or might make us change our minds or lives. Perhaps it is the Church, the source of a simplistic message that too often minimizes the necessity for the strenuous task of theology. Perhaps it is disillusionment, a consequence of theology at the hands of those who wield it for their own selfish ends.

Whatever the source, it is clear that there is a crisis of theology in the Church today, leading to the mitigation or even absence of its message. Most likely, a complex grouping of causes has created this despair, a despair that brings about weakness and defiance in us all at various times. Nevertheless, this despair in turn effects a flight from our theological selves, from the task of reflecting upon, understanding and acting according to the truth of our reality. This flight from theology is sin, for in it we turn from our true selves, from who God has made us to be.

### **So What?**

Perhaps at this point, some would claim that I go too far. “Are you saying that in order truly to be a Christian, I have to read Thomas Aquinas and Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa until I am blue in the face? That I have to be an egghead theologian?” Well, in a sense, that is exactly what I am saying. To be a theologian is part of what it means to be a Christian; we must reflect upon our reality – a reflection found in theology – if we are to embrace our ontology. This is not to downgrade the praxis of Christianity, but even

according to this principle, practice is absolutely inseparable from careful theological reflection. Besides, why can the act of theology not be a central practice of the faith?

Of course, often we lack the time to do theology, and some theology is unhelpful or beyond us. But I think that too often these legitimate reasons are used as excuses. As to the first excuse – the truth of the matter is that we all think theologically. We all have thoughts about ultimate reality. We should be intentional about those thoughts; we are dealing with issues of incomparable importance in theological reflection. As to the second excuse – the fact is that we can always learn. Perhaps theology can be poorly constructed or too esoteric or even seemingly heretical, but it should never be discounted. The viewpoints of others can only help us develop our own theology (and help others develop theirs), as long as we are humble enough to listen, and admit we are wrong if need be.

For the sake of clarity, I want briefly to identify three distinct – though not completely separate – reasons why we ought to do theology. First, we do theology because God commands it. Theology is an act of obedience. We are to love God with our whole selves, including our minds, Jesus reminds us. There is no discernable reason why we ought to know theological truths less comprehensively than movie or television plots, or sports facts, or celebrity news. God has commanded us to know and understand God and ourselves as central to reality, and this understanding is precisely the practice of theology.

Second, theology accords us to our ontology. If we are to be Christians and act as Christians, we must know what a Christian looks like. In order to know God and to know ourselves we must do theology. Israel knew this; the priests and scribes spent their lives striving to understand and communicate theology. While in Christianity there are also those who are given the commission of “priest” or “scribe,” to a large degree we all must discern the meaning and mandate of theology for our lives. We have already outlined what happens if we do not involve ourselves in the task of theological reflection: we will misunderstand some part of ourselves, be it our finitude or our self-transcendence. Without theology, we lose what Kierkegaard terms our inner “spirit,” which is the kinetical relationality amongst the various poles of our humanity. Succinctly put, the proper practice of theology is precisely the Kierkegaardian sense of the act of the relation’s relating the aspects of our ontology. In the sin of a non-theological self, we reject our kinetic relationality with

God and others, instead seeking the stability of static existence, shunning the dynamism ontology in which we were created.

But it is the third necessity of theology that is perhaps the most important, and perhaps most overlooked. I think that the essentiality of theological reflection goes beyond our responsibility and ontology as Christians. The result of sin is the loss of our proper selves. In theology, we are able not only to understand but also to apprehend our proper ontology, wherein our sin may be overcome. Therefore, I want to suggest that in the act of theology, as provided by the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, consists salvation. But to make this claim, further explanation is required.

Salvation is often understood with an emphasis on the past tense or the future tense. Past or “perfect-tense salvation” may be understood in large part through the doctrine of election. God has chosen, either before all time (supralapsarianism) or after the Fall (infralapsarianism) to “save” some portion of humanity, or all of humanity. This decision is then carried out in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The history of creation, and our existence now, is the legislation of a decision that has already been made. Our fates are sealed before we were born. We might say that this election-driven soteriology is based upon the determination of the first person of the Trinity.

“Future-tense salvation” is understood in large part through the doctrine of eschatology. Either through Divine decision, or a more Arminian sense of the human decision, we are “saved,” meaning that we have garnered our get-into-heaven ticket. Thus salvation really begins after we have died and ascended into heaven. We might identify this eschatological soteriology with the second person of the Trinity, for it is Christ’s second coming that will institute our true salvation.

It ought to be pointed out that though each may receive emphasis, usually these two tenses of salvation are not understood in isolation. Salvation can be, indeed ought to be, understood in both tenses – as a Divine decision concerning our fate that is not fully actualized until the eschaton. Or Christ can be understood as a recapitulation or recreation of humanity as instituted by the decision of God that will be fully revealed and applied in the hereafter. However, it is too often the case that in soteriological reflection there is one tense that is given short shrift: the present.

This soteriological reductionism, which I think is tacitly promoted in the Church today, likely began as a

reaction to mystical and historical understandings of salvation, especially as found in the liberal theologies of Schleiermacher and the Ritschlian School. Salvation, according to theologies such as these, was seen as the apprehension of the proper inner state. But these present-tense soteriologies, critics said, were not sufficiently Christological. Christ and His work, the critique claimed, are treated in a merely utilitarian manner if the locus of salvation becomes one’s own inner state. Salvation becomes something that is found in the individual’s achievement of inward peace as signified by the presence of Christ’s spirit, a state found fully in the human Jesus of Nazareth. Naysayers said salvation so understood is too subjective, and too individualistic.

And these critiques are not bad ones, and may be applied to many extant soteriologies. Salvation can become too subjective when understood as a state within the individual that need not correspond to an objective reality. Salvation can become too individualistic

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***...theological reflection mediates  
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consciously present.***

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when understood as an inner state that one may achieve through her own sufficient reflection or mystical communion. In either case, the locus of salvation becomes the individual’s own subjective state rather than in Christ. We become the subject of salvation rather than God, and two essential aspects of reality become downplayed: God’s agency and the effects of sin on our ability to attain anything salvific.

However, as valid as these critiques may be, their well-meaning efforts to stamp out subjectivism (understood theologically as Manichaeism) and individualism (understood theologically as Pelagianism) often create a soteriological reductionism. A complete absence of subjectivism and individualism can leave us without any present experience of redemption. This seems to run counter to Scripture, which seems to promise us over and over that salvation is not merely something that has been determined for us in election, nor merely something that will hopefully come about eschatologically. Scripture has shown us that, in Christ, God brings salvation presently and personally. Scripture has shown us that salvation comes in the act of Divine presence.

To avoid reductionism and understand salvation

robustly, we must perceive our soteriology as not only past and future, but also present. Present-tense salvation need not be subjective or individualistic, at least not to the detriment of Christocentrism. Salvation may be understood as a Divine determination perfectly completed in Christ and fully actualized in us eschatologically. But we can also understand this as an inaugurated eschatology. Just as Peter, James and John caught a glimpse of past and future glory at the Transfiguration, so might we presently experience now that which will be consummated on the Day.

Of what does this present experience of salvation consist? Nothing less than the presence of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We might call this a “Third-Person Soteriology.” By the doctrinal principal of *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*, it ought to be noted that all hypostases of the Trinity are at work in any sense of salvation. However, in distinction from those soteriologies emphasizing work appropriated to the first or second person of the Trinity, present-tense salvation defines our experience of salvation as mediated to us by the Holy Spirit, a mediation that avoids unnecessary subjectivism or individualism. It is not a salvation that exists only by virtue of our inner state, but is rather the application or actualization of that which exists outside of us, in Christ. And it is not a salvation that is achieved by virtue of our own mystic work of epiphany, but is rather the gift of grace through the presence of the Spirit.

Present salvation is the presence of Christ to us in faith by the gracious act of the Holy Spirit. Our salvation is an objective fact. Our salvation is the work of God and not us. But we presently experience that fact and that work precisely in our reflection upon that fact and that work. Our present experience of salvation as such is found in the practice of theology, as simple or as complex as it may be. What we do in our attempted flight from theological reflection is not only sinful but also tragic, for in it we reduce our own salvation.

To clarify, I do not mean to say that God’s presence exists only in theological reflection, nor that theological reflection must be performed in some certain manner in order to “achieve” God’s presence. God obviously is in constant action, including that which is outside of our understanding. However, I do mean to say that our experience of salvation as God’s presence requires a consciousness of that presence. This consciousness is the awareness of God’s grace, God’s power, God’s love – in short, everything that is God – as presently real. Succinctly, theological reflection mediates present salvation when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ

becomes consciously present. We do not become a “theological self” of “infinite reality” until we understand ourselves as before God, until we understand ourselves in union with Christ, until we understand ourselves within a reality as defined theologically.

According to Martin Luther’s dictum, we are saved by grace through faith. The gift of salvation is present in faith; not faith as an adherence to some set of beliefs, but faith as the spiritual presence of Christ. However, this gift of faith must be properly understood that we might fully embrace it, be thankful for it, and conduct our lives accordingly. In other words our lives become a process of growing theological reality, a journey of “faith seeking understanding.”

Jesus was with those on the road to Emmaus, but it was not until He explained the Scriptures to them that “their eyes were opened.” Christ had already died and been resurrected for their salvation. But it was when He interpreted the meaning of their experience, of their “hearts burning within,” that they became conscious of salvation’s presence in their midst.

### What Now?

In this article, I have tried to explain my claim for the soteriological necessity of theological reflection. Not only is it obedient deliberation concerning our responsibility as Christians, and not only is it the proper enactment and apprehension of our ontology, but it is also key to our present salvation. In closing, I want to draw a few conclusions concerning this third-person soteriology.

We have noted that the work of each of the three hypostases of the Trinity are present in every act of God. We might also say that each hypostatic Person tells us about God’s character in relation to us. Creator God, the first person of the Trinity, shows us that God has chosen to be our God. In Christ, the incarnate second person, we see that God will not tolerate separation from us. And in the Holy Spirit, we see that God is constantly with us, working for our redemption here and now. The dictates of a third-person soteriology lift up this third aspect of God’s presence with us without sacrificing the fact that this salvation is also a product of God’s decisive grace from eternity, and that it will remain unconsummated until the eschaton.

To fill out the relation between redemptive theology and the Holy Spirit’s soteriological role, I want to outline the nature of the Holy Spirit in two realms – its role within the Trinity, and its role toward humanity. First, within the Trinity, the Holy Spirit serves as the bond of love between the Father and the Son. Augustine tells us that the Spirit is the act of relational-

ity binding together the Begotten and the Unbegotten – not a synthesis of the two, but the actual, vital bond between them. This bears a striking resemblance to the Kierkegaardian understanding of human ontology as the relation's act of relating diverse aspects of the individual. This is our *imago Dei*. Our ability to transcend any static sense of being indicates a nature that is properly kinetic. In the same way, Thomas Aquinas lifts up the quality of God as *actus purus*, or “pure act.” This is the spiritual sense of God, just as Kierkegaard calls our inherent dynamism our “spirit.” Our created kinetic nature mirrors the kinetic nature of God the Spirit.

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Second, the filioque clause in the Apostle's Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This procession is oriented toward humanity. Similarly, Kierkegaard posits our dynamism as that which allows us to relate to God. By the power of the Spirit, and by virtue of our created kinetic nature in the *imago Dei*, we might find communion with God in a Spirit-to-spirit relationality. This communion is not only a theoretical fact as dictated by election, nor is it merely something that we wait for eschatologically. We may taste that union now. Our salvation occurs within an inaugurated eschatology, an ultimate reality that is already-but-not-yet. Just as Peter, John and James, we catch glimpses of the final consummation. For God to be God, and for us to be truly human, both the Spirit and the spirit reach out to each other by their very natures. And sometimes, probably more often than we think, they embrace.

Therefore, both our kinetic ontology and God's spiritual nature indicate a third person soteriology – it is in our nature, and in God's nature, to be in communion with one another here and now. Just as our spirit holds together the opposites in our human nature, so it is God's nature to hold all of reality together. God is in the business, so to speak, of being present to us. The nature of Divine reality is relationality between the opposites of the ultimate dialectic – between fallen humanity and a loving God.

My contention is that the act of theological reflection is a key component, perhaps the key component, to our present apprehension of Spirit-to-spirit relationality.

To become the “theological self,” to understand ourselves as within ultimate theological reality, is to experience the truth of God and ourselves. Does this mean that the more advanced theologian is more “saved” than the pre-adolescent Sunday schooler? Of course not! Both are theologians, both have understandings of God that are salutary, and it very well may be that at times that the simpler understanding is the better one.

Yet our theology must never become simplistic. We must doggedly pursue the complex truths of theology, for in it lays the fullness of salvation. To the extent that theology leads us to truth concerning God and ourselves, to the extent that theology shows us how to bring about the Kingdom through acts of justice and mercy, to the extent that theology allows us to rest in the grace of God, to the extent that theology allows us to fully worship our Lord, to the extent that theology encourages and pushes us to love others, to the extent that theology brings us into the presence of the Christ – to that extent, we must pursue the truths presented by theology, and to that extent, theology begets salvation.

Of course, our theology is often incorrect or incomplete. But the strenuous task of theology ought not deter us. Sometimes we encounter a difficult doctrine or theologian. Sometimes we take a bad theology class, or read poor theology. Sometimes we deal with topics that are uncomfortable or convicting. Sometimes we will be weak, or defiant. But to abandon theology is sinful, for it is disobedience, it is malformation, and it limits the fullness of salvation.

If we want to be fully human and fully in possession of a robust salvation, we must fully embrace our spiritual reality as defined for us in theology, and as apprehended in the practice of theology. Though theological reflection may be salutary, it is hard work, often frustrating; we are constantly reminded that we are not ourselves the possessors of all truth, but only recipients. All we can do is humbly live in the spiritual and mysterious salvation of faith, seeking what it is to be a Christian, endeavoring to understand the truth which we have been given, always remembering that “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”



# ‘Blessed be Egypt My People’

Karl Barth and the election of the outsider in the Old Testament

By Christopher B. Hays

This paper reflects my interaction with some challenging biblical texts and the doctrine of double predestination that some reformed theologians have derived from them. To me, there is little in the formation of Christian persons that is more significant than understanding God’s ultimate intentions for the created world, and especially humans beings, whom he created in his own image. It seems to me that little else so deeply affects the way we live and preach the Gospel.

Although I don’t want to generalize too much from my own experience, many students (and others) in the Reformed tradition probably also wonder what they should believe about election, especially in light of Barth’s well-known challenge to Calvin on this point. Many of us would admit that even as the heart warms to Karl Barth’s doctrine of election, the mind rebels. Surely there is too much wrath and too much hardness of heart in the Bible for us to believe that God’s election is universal. When Barth writes that the election of Jesus Christ is “all-inclusive” and “in its very uniqueness is universally meaningful and efficacious,”<sup>1</sup> the counterexamples immediately begin to stack up in our mind. The point of the question here is eternal reprobation, and we know-do we not?-that Esau and Pharaoh and how many others have been predestined as “vessels of wrath.” Barth’s case in the *Church Dogmatics* is quite strong, yet he does not really take on the traditional interpretations of these two stories. Calvin, whose name is forever linked to double predestination, is quite clear that those stories support his position. It will be my task to assess which conclusion they favor.

Calvin’s basic formulation of predestination and election that has passed into Reformed orthodoxy appears in the Institutes III.xxi.5:

We call predestination God’s eternal decree by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others.

The point on which Barth challenges Calvin is that of eternal reprobation. He is quite happy to grant that God wills to eternal life, but not the converse. Barth’s cri-

tique, briefly stated, is that eternal reprobation is not a necessary inference from the fact of election—that although Scripture teaches that not all are saved, the reason for that is somewhat uncertain. It must be a great “misunderstanding” on the part of the damned, since Scripture also teaches that God elects all.<sup>2</sup>

It may be that Barth and others are doing Calvin a service here, since he “was clearly not happy with the question of the certitude of election.”<sup>3</sup> He adopted double predestination to answer the question, *Why, when the gospel is preached, do some believe and others not?* Yet he is almost immediately forced to embark on a defense against various objections that goes on for whole chapters. No one can say that Calvin’s heart is not in the right place. He concludes, with Augustine, that “as we do not know who belongs to the number of the predestined or who does not, we ought to be so minded as to wish that all men be saved.”<sup>4</sup> And yet there is clearly something wanting here. Calvin himself seems to mourn the necessity of this “dreadful decree,” yet he is repeatedly forced to discourage his reader from inquiring further: “O mortal, who art thou?”

Barth insists, “Why should they not enquire concerning [election], if it is true, and if they know that we have here two very different things and that the decisive word for salvation is spoken at that hidden and secret place?”<sup>5</sup> In short, Barth acknowledges the validity of the Catholic objection to justification by faith, that it ultimately grounds salvation in the untrustworthy self-confidence of the believer. Barth goes on: “When we let ourselves be taught by the Word of God and the Spirit of God, then we can and should be sure of the divine election.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the answer to election is to be found in Jesus Christ as he is attested in scripture, not in some hidden decree.

## Exegesis and election

The most intense exegetical debate about election and reprobation has focused on the New Testament, especially Romans 9-11. Barth does do significant Old

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Testament exegesis; He spends considerable energy on three sections: Leviticus 14 and 16, the story of Saul and David, and 1 Kings 13. These are rich and significant expositions, and I suspect he purposely avoids the classical loci concerning election and predestination in order to broaden the scope of the debate. But I intend to take a close look at the sections of the Old Testament that inspired Calvin and a host of other interpreters to settle on the necessity of a *decretum horribile*.<sup>7</sup> Two primary strands will be my focus: the primeval history and family stories of Genesis, and the Egypt story from Joseph all the way to the prophets.

Genesis is a particularly important section for the question of eternal reprobation—especially Jacob and Esau, because of Paul’s use of them in Romans 9. Since interpreters disagree about what Paul means to say,<sup>8</sup> it may help to return to the original texts, including the related words of Malachi. I have chosen to briefly survey the whole patriarchal sequence because the story of Jacob and Esau is more comprehensible in context. The story of Joseph’s brothers serves as a sort of bridge between the family stories and the Egypt sequence. Like the story of Egypt, it speaks to the question of resisting and subverting God’s plans. The Egypt sequence itself raises the issues to the level of geopolitics. God’s managing of his promise now draws him into the management of nations. If Barth is right that God’s election is concerned with individuals only in a subordinate way to communities, then the story of this much-discussed Old Testament nation should bear out his conclusions. Yet the questions are quite similar: How much freedom does Pharaoh have in the hardening of his heart; and is it possible to resist and subvert God’s will?

This is not at all to say that Barth has not recognized the possibilities in the sections that I am taking up. He writes, “Ishmael and Esau, Pharaoh, too, and Saul and Cyrus, even Judas Iscariot, and the heathen both far and near, all these are elected, at least potentially, as witnesses to God’s electing and man’s election.”<sup>9</sup> But that is only a passing remark. In his exegesis, Barth is brief with the Genesis narratives, giving them only a page and a half. And he does not address Egypt or Pharaoh at all. A closer reading of these texts forces us to reconsider what election is. What did God’s choosing or not choosing really mean for Israel, its forefathers, and its neighbors?

One may object, *Do these stories really matter so much?* Although systematic theologians are likely to weight the Bible’s propositional statements about God

more heavily than its narratives, still if the two conflict then we will have a problem. Barth writes, “Who and what Jesus Christ is, is something which can only be told, not a system which can be considered and described.”<sup>10</sup> The same is true for God as He is revealed in the Old Testament. Though narrative requires deftness and care to interpret rightly, it is as true a portrait of God as any. If Barth has understood Christ correctly, then the Old Testament stories about God must not openly contradict his conclusions about election.

### The primeval history

God begins choosing among humans immediately after the Fall: “The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” It is not clear at this point what God intends by favoring Abel, but there is no particular reason for it. “Writers have looked diligently for the basis of this preference, but it lies neither in the ritual nor in Cain’s attitude. Nothing of that kind is indicated,” concludes Gerhard von Rad. “Obviously the narrator wants to remove the acceptance of the sacrifice from man and place it completely within God’s free will.”<sup>11</sup> “Inexplicable,” says Walter Brueggemann.<sup>12</sup>

Brueggemann goes on to say that God has gotten off far too easy in interpretations of this pericope. There is something to that. God presents Cain with a choice and a warning, but God already appears untrustworthy to him. Although the choice to sin is Cain’s, the roots of his decision appear to lie in some inscrutable decree of favoritism toward Abel. In short, this passage already prefigures the questions of election and reprobation that become explicit much later.

The decision of God with regard to Cain is in two parts: (1) The ground will no longer yield him its bounty, and (2) he will be a wanderer. (Genesis 4:11-12) But Cain hears God’s punishment as being worse than it was, adding, “I shall be hidden from your face ... and anyone who meets me may kill me.” (4:14) Those are connected ideas, since the turning of God’s face to a human is a common sign of blessing (cf. Psalms 4:6, 31:16, 80:3). Without God’s blessing, Cain knows he will not survive. But God does not let this misinterpretation stand. He corrects Cain: “Not so!” (4:15) And God gives him a mark of protection to confirm that Cain is still under his care. There is inequality with God, but is this the action of a God who predestines his unchosen to eternal destruction?

This pattern of judgment followed by a reaffirmation of God’s care for the creature had emerged already

in the story of the Fall. Yes, Adam and Eve are cursed, like Cain; but as with Cain, God gives a token of his continuing love for them in the tenderness of his act of clothing. The verbs of 3:21-making (תָּשַׁׁע) and clothing (תָּבְּנֵה)-are not “Godlike” verbs, they are not בָּרַא (“to create”, cf. 1:1 etc.) or the like. Instead they evoke an image of God as a loving and simple parent sending His children off to school.

Did God foreordain the Fall? Did he foreknow Cain’s decision to kill his brother? We cannot say yet. What we can note is that God’s treatment of those whom he seems to have condemned to fallenness and wrongdoing is not that of a ruthless judge, but of a correcting parent who wants the best for his creatures. Furthermore, being chosen is no simple guarantee of prosperity.<sup>13</sup> As Barth notes: “the determination of Abel, of the offering that is well-pleasing to God, is a determination to death.”<sup>14</sup>

These hard-to-distinguish categories of chosen and not-chosen continue to play themselves out throughout Genesis. Not only is God’s choosing often an invitation to suffer, but God has a notable habit of gracing those who are not part of the covenant, but merely near it.

### The family stories

I read the progression of God’s interaction with man throughout Genesis as essentially an epistemological tale: How will God make himself known to humankind? How will He convince stiff-necked humanity not only to submit to his rule, but also to love Him with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their might? By the end of the primeval history in Genesis 11, God has tried offering paradise, destroying the world by flood, and mixing the people’s languages and scattering them across the earth. None of these appears to have worked. So God does a new thing, and focuses his attention on one family. God shows his hand when He says that He has chosen Abraham “that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (18:19-21). Since God’s earlier actions have not resulted in humankind’s “keeping the way of the Lord,” perhaps this choosing of a single family will do it. But it is not that God has narrowed his purpose. He chooses Abraham in order that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3).

When Abraham first answers God’s call to leave his homeland, his nephew Lot goes with him (12:4). But Lot and Abraham go their separate ways when the land will no longer support both of them (13:11). It is

immediately after Lot is out of the way that the Lord reaffirms his promise to Abraham (13:14); the Lord seems to be active in this story, choosing against Lot and for Abraham’s own offspring. Lot settles among great sinners, but God does not forget this one who was near the promise: “When God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.” (19:29) There is further sordidness for Lot-incest with his two daughters-and yet in the end he is strangely blessed as the father of two nations, Moab and Ammon (19:37-38).

Abraham comes out somewhat better, but we must be wary of even imagining, much less concluding, that Abraham is somehow more worthy than Lot of God’s grace. It is not as if he earned his election. Just as Lot dragged his feet when God warned him to flee from Sodom, so Abraham is guilty of slowness to believe God’s grace, repeatedly doubting his promise of a son (see below). Even the sexual indiscretion of offering his wife to every powerful ruler they meet (12:10ff., 20:1ff.) is a sort of mirror to Lot’s offering his daughters to an angry mob (19:8).

And is Abraham really so lucky? His one moment of glory as the father of faith is so costly. Ellen Davis describes a Rembrandt painting of the Akkedah, just after Abraham’s hand is stayed by the angel:

This is the moment of release from God’s demand. But it comes too late for Abraham to feel relief. He seems not even to see the angel, nor does he look at the boy. He has the unfocused stare, the ravaged expression of someone who has survived something unspeakable. Rembrandt shows us just what it costs Abraham to be fully responsive to God and fully responsive to his son. It costs, in T.S. Eliot’s phrase, “not less than everything.”<sup>15</sup>

Kierkegaard confesses that he is “shattered” merely by thinking of Abraham.<sup>16</sup> We cannot yet say what it is to be chosen, but we must take account of this when we do.

The next one excluded from the promise is Ishmael. Abraham doubts God’s judgment, hoping that this son by the slave-girl Hagar will be the child of the promise. God has just repeated that Sarah will bear him an heir, but why should he trust in such wild promises when he already has a son? He laughs at the thought of the aged Sarah bearing a child, and then fairly howls, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (17:17-18) God could not be clearer in his purposes, and he even-

tually instructs Abraham to acquiesce to Sarah and send him away (21:12), but in a sense Abraham's request is granted. God does bestow his blessing and regard on Ishmael (17:20). He promises Hagar that he will "make a great nation of [Ishmael]" (21:18) and helps them both survive (21:19). In terms of worldly success Isaac and Ishmael are scarcely distinguishable. Eventually, they will bury Abraham together. Ishmael is not chosen, but is he condemned? We cannot yet say what it is to be excluded by God from the chosen line, but we must take account of this when we do.

Isaac's sons are Jacob and Esau. Before their birth, God tells Rebekah that "the elder shall serve the younger"-contrary, as God's will so often is, to the humanly expected conventions. And God's prediction is borne out, as Esau foolishly sells his birthright for a bowl of stew. "Thus Esau despised his birthright." (25:34). Like Cain, Esau chooses to live as one rejected. Is the choice truly free or is it somehow coerced by God's eternal will? The real question is: God's eternal will may precede time, and may be unequal, but does it necessarily or obviously condemn the unchosen to suffer eternally? Does the Old Testament even suggest as much? Like Ishmael before him and Joseph's brothers after him, Esau does not and cannot completely refuse blessing (27:39-40, cf. also 16:11-12, 49:1-21). In the course of time Esau is a father of a nation; he makes peace with Jacob. As Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham, so Esau and Jacob bury Isaac together. And Jacob, the chosen one, the trickster, still must sweat and struggle for his blessing, and he is wounded in the struggle (32:25, 31). Barth slyly alludes to this passage: "If [God] is present to His elect, this means that they must wrestle with Him as an enemy to be partakers of His blessing."<sup>17</sup> To wrestle with God as an enemy means to suffer as God's enemies do-or perhaps more than they. Jacob will say, near the end of his days, "few and hard have been the years of my life" (47:9).

In the theft of his status as chosen, it seems the primary thing that Esau has lost is his struggle. Now Jacob is now the one to be renamed "Israel"-he struggles with God." The very name of God's chosen people aptly reveals that their status contains a blessing and curse. What does it mean when Malachi 1:3 says that God has "hated" Esau? Certainly not that he is so different from Israel. Israel knows God's hatred. Even a quick word study on שׁוֹלֵךְ, the verb used for Esau in Malachi, reveals the likes of Amos 6:8, Isaiah 1:14 and Hosea 9:15, where Israel is one hated. Another example is Jeremiah 12:8-

My heritage has become to me  
like a lion in the forest;  
she has lifted up her voice against me-  
therefore I hate her.

Nor is God's wrath toward Israel limited to one verb. Much of the story of His interaction with Israel from the Pentateuch forward is a story of His wrath and judgment to them. It may be argued by those who support eternal reprobation that in all of these passages God's hatred is (1) occasioned by real transgressions rather than predetermined and (2) ultimately contained as God relents. "His anger is but for a moment;/ his favor is for lifetime" (Psalm 30:5). Famous passages like Isaiah 40 ("Comfort, O comfort my people/...she has received from the Lord's hand/ double for all her sins.") and Hosea 14 tell the story of God's softening to his people:

I will heal their disloyalty:  
I will love them freely.  
for my anger has turned from them. (Hosea 14:4)

This fact-that hatred is not God's ultimate disposition toward Israel-is readily granted. The question remains: Is that really his eternal and final disposition toward Esau, or Cain, or other entities that are sometimes considered reprobate?

One might want here to take up Paul's own exegesis of Malachi 1:2-3, in Romans 9. The most troubling verse to Barth's reading is 9:22: "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction?" I observe that the question is conjectural, introduced by "ei"- "if."<sup>18</sup> It is essentially one long hypothetical with scripture citations that does not end until v. 30. The question in short form is something like, *What if God worked in this dreadful, apparently unfair way? What then are we to say?* In the context of v. 20 ("Who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?"), this whole question has the force of a challenge rather than a propositional statement. Paul does not rule out the possibility that this is how God works, but neither does he frankly assert it. Furthermore, in the parallel construction that Paul is building, Israel, "who did strive for righteousness," is now (after Christ) compared to Esau. Meanwhile the Gentiles, by this marvelous caprice of God, have attained righteousness without even striving for it. Yet we know that God has not rejected his people (11:1),

nor have they stumbled so as to fall (11:11); indeed it is possible that all Israel is to be saved (11:26). So perhaps the situation for Esau is not as bleak as one would first believe.

So far we have not disproved Barth's statement that "those who are cut off, who are not distinguished by actual choice, are not on that account utterly rejected, but do in their own way remain in a positive relation to the covenant of God."<sup>19</sup>

How far can the grace of that covenant be pushed? Is there not some point of rejection of God at which His patience ends? In trying to answer that question, I would like to consider two cases which together tell a whole story. The first is the case of Joseph and his brothers; the second is of the broader relationship between Israel and Egypt from the Exodus onward.

### Joseph and his brothers

Joseph is a sort of prophet, receiving true visions in his dreams even as a youth. Yet he is also despised by his brothers because he is favored by his father, Jacob, and because his dreams foretell that he will have dominion over his family. Therefore his brothers—who are to become the tribes of Israel—throw him in a pit, sell him into slavery and fake his death. Not since Cain killed Abel has anyone gone quite so far to challenge God's will.

God is quiet in this story. As Joseph is carried away to slavery in Egypt and then jailed, there is little mention of God doing anything for this one to whom he has sent his word. Only Joseph himself gives credit to God, as for example when he interprets dreams. Even the narrator is mute about God's role. In any case, Joseph rises to power in Egypt, and more than that, he is completely assimilated. He marries an Egyptian, names his first son Manasseh—“making to forget”—and presumably he grows to like the cry that goes before his chariot: “Bow the knee!” His insight allows Egypt to prepare for a famine; and when it arrives, the rest of the world comes to him on bent knee to buy the grain that he has wisely stored up.

Among those who come are Joseph's own brothers. Like God, who feels wrath and makes his people suffer, Joseph puts his brothers through the wringer. He sends them home, confuses them by returning their silver, and demands their youngest brother. The brothers, not recognizing him, fear that this harsh treatment is God's punishment for their treatment of Joseph: “They said to one another, ‘Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish

when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.’” (42:21) Then Joseph reveals himself to them, and they are speechless with dismay. Now they are sure the situation is even worse—they must face not only God's wrath, but Joseph's. And indeed he sets Benjamin up to look like a thief and threatens to keep him as a prisoner, which Jacob warned would “bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.” (42:38) Judah reports this to Joseph in desperation. He is all but on his knees, pleading for his father's life. And so Joseph's heart softens before his people's suffering, as God's so often does. He reveals himself and promises them a new future amid all the riches of Egypt. Much more than this, he absolves them of guilt: “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” (45:5) He repeats himself in 45:7: God has sent him ahead of them to preserve life—perhaps not only for them, but certainly for them. (The verb “preserve life,” a Hiphil form of שָׁמַר, is the same used for Noah's preserving life in the ark.) This is both an act of God and Joseph's act. Or, better: Joseph's grace is an echo of God's. Writes Barth: “The elect man in his place and fashion is, in his being, a copy of the divine being.”<sup>20</sup>

How many times over the years must the brothers have feared retribution for their sin? Surely it is not only this hardship that brought it to their minds. How much must their sin and fear have hurt their souls, like shrapnel festering in the body? And then they discover that, far from harboring their sin in order to punish, God has been at work to save them. Far from hating them, God has loved them. They have determined and expected to live as the non-elect, as those whom God hates, but they are unsuccessful. Their choice is void.

Yet the brothers still cannot imagine that the grace is real. No sooner has Jacob died than they begin to fear again. They go to Joseph, begging forgiveness for the crime of which he has already absolved them (50:17). And Joseph responds to them in the words of so many theophanies:<sup>21</sup> “Do not be afraid.” And then he adds, “Am I in the place of God?” Is the irony intended? Because although he will not judge and punish like God, he is in the place of God, carrying out His purposes in the world. Joseph again affirms that he was sent by God to “preserve.” And “even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” (50:20). This harm was intended not merely to Joseph and to God's plan but to themselves. They have done all they could to be enemies of God and to damn them—

selves. And so to them applies what Barth says of the one who chooses to live as though he were rejected: "His choice itself and as such is...null. He chooses as and what he cannot choose. He chooses as if he were able to choose otherwise than in correspondence to his election."<sup>22</sup>

In this case the irresistibility of God's grace is played out manifestly in the events of a family's history. In real life, this happens. Sometimes the one living a rejected life may turn around when offered the promise of the Gospel. But often life is not so neat. Often, people continue to deny their election even to death. Both Barth and the Bible are aware of this problem.

### Israel and Egypt

As we move to the story of Egypt and the Exodus, it may seem that we are jumping from one genre to another, that the story of Egypt as it unfolds and is taken up again by the prophets is somehow deeply different from the family stories of Genesis. Yet note that all of the individuals discussed above are the fathers of nations, and the stories Genesis tells about them are at least partly etiological. They are intended to help Israel make sense of neighboring nations-where they came from and why they are the way they are. Esau, for example, stands for all of Edom, and Judah for all of his tribe. In Exodus, we may read Pharaoh too as a symbol for all of Egypt. In Exodus 1:22, Pharaoh involves his whole nation in the guilt of the genocide of the Jews, and they will all suffer as one.

It is worth noting that the hard slavery that Israel undergoes is not its own fault. Invited into the land only a couple of generations before with a former Pharaoh's promises of bounty and safety, Israel's only crime is being fruitful and prolific (Gen. 45:16-20; cf. also Ex. 1:6-8). Furthermore, Pharaoh determines to "deal shrewdly" with them (1:10) and begins killing their male babies (1:22) long before God ever reveals his intention to harden his heart. Even in 3:19, God's comment about Pharaoh appears to reflect only foreknowledge:<sup>23</sup> "I know...that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand." It is not until 4:21 that God says he will "harden Pharaoh's heart."<sup>24</sup> Calvin writes that "God destined Pharaoh to destruction and left him to his own devices."<sup>25</sup> But is it not the other way around? Was his heart not *already* hard? Was he not *already* determined to oppose God? Indeed it appears from the story that God left Pharaoh to his own devices *until he opposed God's purposes*.

On a fresh reading, Pharaoh's fate seems more of his own making than some theologians want to say. Concerns about eternal reprobation or even lack of free will find rather weak support here. Only the magnitude of Egypt's punishment would seem to be affected by God's agency.

The punishment is truly awful for Egypt. Practically the whole nation is struck down by God and afflicted. Pharaoh and his army are drowned. At one point, Moses asks Pharaoh on behalf of God: "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?" (10:3) The answer: To the very last Pharaoh and Egypt are deceitful and opposed to God.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Joseph's brothers, Egypt is not shown God's grace within the bounds of the story. God's victory passes into song, and then the Israelites are on to their own adventures, with hardly a glance back over their shoulder. Egypt is judged and destroyed. Its welfare is forgotten. Its redemption does not appear to take place within history.

Yet it is better to say that Egypt is not shown God's grace *again*. After all, its success in recent history had been thanks to Joseph. We should not, like Pharaoh,

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***God destroyed Egypt not because he eternally elected to hate it, but because he eternally elected to love the world through Israel***

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forget Egypt's debt to the Israelites. Was Abraham's great-grandson not a blessing to the rest of the world in a time of famine? But Egypt opposed this grace, and oppressed the people of God who brought it. *God destroyed Egypt not because he eternally elected to hate it, but because he eternally elected to love the world through Israel*. Writes Barth, "It is also true that in the world there is opposition to the love of God, indeed this opposition constitutes the being of the world as such. ... But the will and the power of God smash this opposition. Where the opposition does not break down in faith in the Son given, even the love of God must itself be destructive."<sup>27</sup>

Has God, in destroying Egypt, abandoned the rest of the world in favor of Israel alone? That would be a

shift from his obvious concern with all humanity in the primeval history, and especially in light of his first words to Abraham. It is terse, but it concludes with a statement of God's purpose: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Israel was God's chosen instrument of grace for the world, and Egypt received grace by it. So when Egypt turned against God's agent of grace, it was also turning against God Himself. Only then did it experience wrath, which was the necessary playing out of God's irresistible grace against whatever opposes it. So God's judgment of Egypt lends substance to Barth's statement that "even God's judgment is sustained and surrounded by God's mercy, even His severity by his kindness, even His wrath by His love."<sup>28</sup>

### Israel is distinguished-but in what way?

Still it is true that the Exodus marks a break in God's relationship to the world. Return to the question of God's epistemological project: It was always clear that Israel was to have a special role as a witness to God, but other nations' roles were usually not defined negatively. Genesis 12:3 hints at the fate of nations that oppose Israel—"The one who curses you I will curse"—but this threat has remained abstract. It gets its first serious test in Exodus, and God proves faithful to his word.

But now that God has destroyed, he has more clearly taken sides among political entities rather than just within a family. When he promises the Israelites protection from the final plague, God says it is "so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel." (11:7) With the wisdom of hindsight, this comment may seem unnecessary, but actually it might not have been clear to someone looking in from the outside at Joseph's calling to bless both nations equally. Later God agrees to go with the Israelites as they travel so that they will be "distinct...from every people on the face of the earth." (33:16) God is now involved in geopolitics.

Now that the Exodus has earned God Israel's attention, he begins to teach them what it means to be his chosen people-and again it is not merely worldly blessing. It is conditional, and comes with responsibilities:

"If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (19:5-6)

This might be read as an expansion of the call of

Abraham, where the command to be a priestly kingdom is the clarification of what it means for Israel to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. A priest is not a ruler, but an intermediary between God and people. A priest keeps himself ritually pure so that he may approach God's holiness, propitiate God's grace, and bring back a word for the people. Just as there will be a priestly class within Israel, so all Israel will be a priestly class to the world. So the project is still epistemological, and it is still intended for the whole world.<sup>29</sup>

Two interwoven threads depart here. We could follow them, but we will not. One would be a general consideration of Israel's relationship to the nations; the other, an overview of the strains of particularism and universalism that exist within the Old Testament. There is no doubt that good can come out of foreign countries. Shiphrah and Puah, Jethro, Balaam, Rahab, Ruth and Nineveh attest as much. They also show that God's judgment need never be monolithic with respect to whole peoples.<sup>30</sup>

What I do wish to note about the nations is that the tribes of Israel are not generally vaunted over them in the prophets. If anything, Israel is less likely to be held up as an example than to be held to a higher standard. This can be observed simply by skimming a study Bible: Many of the oracles are against Israel itself, and they are frequently grouped side by side with oracles against the nations. More striking still are the passages where Israel's judgment and salvation are directly compared with that of other nations:

I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt;  
I killed your young men with the sword;  
I carried away your horses;  
and I made the stench of your camp go up into  
your nostrils;  
yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.

I overthrew some of you,  
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.  
and you were like a brand snatched from the fire;  
yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.  
(Amos 4:10-11)

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,  
O people of Israel? says the Lord.  
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,  
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans  
from Kir?  
(Amos 9:7)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will

attend to all those who are circumcised only in the fore-skin: Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all those with shaven temples who live in the desert. For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

(Jeremiah 9:25-26)

There are even passages where Israel's election becomes part of the reason for its punishment: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." (Amos 3:2, cf. also Jer. 12:8) But it is not within God's character to destroy his people. Even Amos, who as we have seen distributes God's wrath and grace with uncommon equality, concedes that God "will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob." (9:8) That is a special concession, and one that dates from nearly the beginning of God's history with Israel. God brought Israel out of Egypt for the sake of His name, and Moses warns him after the golden-calf incident that now His name is irreversibly linked to this stiff-necked people: "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." (Exodus 32:12) And God does relent. This scene will repeat itself in various forms, especially in Numbers (e.g. 14:1-25). In the context of His interaction with historic Israel, then, there is a reason for God's special grace toward one nation.

Perhaps, however, other nations do not share in this ultimate promise of grace, since they are not God's priestly nation or treasured possession. Perhaps-to say it again-God has finally turned from His stated purpose. If any nation should bear the brunt of God's eternal hatred, it must be Egypt, whose name appears throughout the Old Testament, in every genre, on countless lips, as a reminder of what God does to those who try to subvert His will. This is what Barth means when he says that some may become "witnesses to" or "symbols of" God's reprobation.<sup>31</sup> But he is careful to distinguish that from real reprobation, from the sword that has been removed once and for all from over the heads of humankind. We have argued that Egypt and the nations are not necessarily eternally condemned and are not judged more harshly than Israel itself. But our case would be more persuasive if there were some sign of God's positive intention for Egypt.

### 'Blessed be Egypt my people': Isaiah 19

Isaiah is not unique among the prophets in its general view of Egypt. Israel is warned against depending on the Egyptians for protection (see Jeremiah 42, 44, 46; Ezekiel 29-30, etc.) Isaiah has a number of passages in this vein, including 31:3 which again links Egypt to Israel in judgment:

The Egyptians are human, and not God;  
their horses are flesh, and not spirit.  
When the Lord stretches out his hand,  
the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall,  
and they will all perish together.

Isaiah also demonstrates another common prophetic theme concerning Egypt and the nations: God's calling forth of exiles out of their adopted lands, back to Jerusalem and the proper worship that it symbolizes:

On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

He will raise a signal for the nations,  
and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,  
and gather the dispersed of Judah  
from the four corners of the earth. ...  
so there shall be a highway from Assyria  
for the remnant that is left of his people,  
as there was for Israel

when they came up from the land of Egypt.  
(Isaiah 11:11-12, 16)

An acquaintance with these patterns helps us appreciate one the most beautiful surprises in scripture, Isaiah 19. It is a carefully constructed passage, beginning with a three-part oracle against Egypt. Verses 1-4 concern political turmoil, defeat and oppression for Egypt; verses 5-10 foresee the drying up of the Nile and the economic disaster that ensues; and verses 11-15 mock the supposed wisdom of Egypt's counselors and sages, who are impotent to solve the crises. These passages do not stand apart much from other prophetic oracles, and attempts to identify historical correspondences or literary strata in these oracles have been "speculative" and "not particularly successful."<sup>32</sup> J.F.A. Sawyer concludes from manuscript evidence that a fifth-century composition date is most likely, but goes on to add: "[T]hat an eighth-century prophet should have spoken thus would be nothing short of a miracle.

Yet this is what our author wishes us to imagine."<sup>19</sup> We will say more below about their relation to history.

Following the oracles of woe, however, there are five prose sayings beginning with "On that day..." which show a fascinating progression.

<sup>19-20</sup> On that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts raises against them. <sup>21</sup> And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the plan that the Lord of hosts is planning against them.

This first section is often mistakenly connected by commentators to the preceding negative oracles. Some commentaries even ignore its formal similarity with what follows and group it with the preceding poetry section.<sup>24</sup> Writes Brueggemann, "The first utterance in prose...is not yet ready for the rehabilitation of Egypt."<sup>25</sup> But this misses the point. Yes, there is a note of triumphalism and even scorn, but the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. In Egypt's fear is the beginning of its rehabilitation.

This section also picks up a major theme of Isaiah, "the notion that the plan of Yahweh is a plan that has been set from eternity"<sup>26</sup> and is effectual over all the earth. Consider 14:26-27: "This is the plan that is planned/ concerning the whole earth;...the Lord of hosts has planned,/ and who will annul it?" Or God's response to Hezekiah's arrogance in 37:26: "I planned from days of old/ what now I bring to pass." So whatever God has planned for Egypt, it is on the order of an eternal decree. Yet fear and overthrow is not all the Lord is planning.

<sup>18</sup> On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.<sup>27</sup>

Here we come to an apparent conflict, or at least double meaning, between the possible historical placement of this text and its meaning in this context. The historical-critical school of interpretation unequivocally sees an allusion "to the spread of the Jewish diaspora in Egypt," which is attested by various papyri; and to the invoking of Yahweh's name to seal forensic contracts.<sup>28</sup> But in focusing on all these details one is deaf to the movement of passage, which has a life of its own. The message here is: Out of the fear will come worship. It may be that Israel's diaspora in Egypt is the agent of

this spread of Yahweh-worship—they have always been called to be a priestly nation—but that worship clearly involves Egyptians, and is thus no less remarkable. The next section goes on to describe the Egyptians' worship of Israel's God:

<sup>19</sup> On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. <sup>20</sup> It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. <sup>21</sup> The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. <sup>22</sup> The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

In short, Egypt is imagined as re-living Israel's history: It cries out; it is heard by God; it is defended and delivered. This is a recapitulation of the Exodus story! Except Egypt has moved from oppressor to oppressed, from the one from whom God frees to the one who is freed. God will reveal himself to Egypt, and Egypt will know and worship God as Israel always has. Yet perhaps it is God's self-revelation to Egypt that is most amazing. "A more complete statement of the full mutual relation of Yahweh and Egypt cannot be imagined," writes Watts. God has long known and been known by his chosen ones, such as Abraham (Gen. 18:19, "chosen"=Hebrew יָדַע "to know") and Moses (Ex. 33:12, Deut. 34:10). In Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should heed him to let Israel go? *I do not know the Lord*, and I will not let Israel go." But Egypt will know God. We have noted that God's project with respect to the world that he cares for is largely epistemological. Now that He wills to be known by Egypt, it appears that the promise is intended for them in some way—and always has been.

Egypt will stray, as Israel always has. But this time, when God strikes, it will heal and not destroy as it did the first time. This is what God has always been to Israel (cf. Hosea 6:1); but while his healing was Israel's distinction from Egypt in Exodus 15:26, here the two are the same. It is a breathtaking reversal for God and Egypt.

One of the much-remarked features of Isaiah is its particular brand of universalism. "The Isaian tradition served as one of the most powerful vectors of the broader and more inclusive way of thinking about

God's saving purpose for the world," writes Joseph Blenkinsopp.<sup>39</sup> But this section also makes clear a qualification that Seitz formulates best:

This is no simple picture of universalism, depicting a time when various religions and various gods are found mutually enriching. Egypt and Assyria turn and worship Israel's God and are incorporated as God's people only by virtue of an extreme case of divine initiative and grace.<sup>40</sup>

Isaiah's universalism is inclusivist rather than pluralist. From the first nations passage (2:1-5) it is clear that Israel's God is sovereign and exclusive. He says, "I am the Lord, and there is no other" (45:18), and other peoples will bring gifts to Him (18:7). There is no attempt to preserve the "self-esteem" of other nations-in fact they are to be put to shame (45:16). There is an imperialist slant to Isaiah of which 21st-century readers are likely to be suspicious. Yet the nations *are* to be enfolded, and this *is* an act of grace. We will have to return to ask when all this will happen.

<sup>23</sup> On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

The conversion of the nations will benefit not only Yahweh, but also those who are converted. We remember that 14:16 also spoke of a highway-there it was a means through which Yahweh forcibly extracts his people from exile, but here it is a highway *connecting* the world in peace and unity (cf. 40:3). Again commentators intrude with speculation about what historical events might have inspired this vision.<sup>41</sup> "But that misses the point," writes Watts. "Historical fulfillment...did not occur."<sup>42</sup> Precisely. This is not *vaticinium ex eventu*. It is a God's-eye view of a *future day* on which every knee will bow and every tongue confess that the God of Israel is the only and true God.

<sup>24</sup> On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, <sup>25</sup> whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

And so God wishes to grant to his enemies the names of endearment that have always belonged to Israel. Egypt and Assyria are no longer mere tools in the hand of God, but are included in his circle of grace. In God's eternal plan, it has always been his intention that his salvation should "reach to the ends of the earth" (49:6).

One runs out of superlatives for the wonder of these words. But this is a God Christians know, who must overthrow the powers that defy him, but who loves his enemies and wishes ultimately to bless them (Matt. 5:43). Writes Barth: "[God] loves his enemies, the godless: not because they are godless; not because they seek to be free of Him; but because He will not let them break away from Him; because in consequence they cannot really break away from Him. What is laid up for man"-even for Egypt and Assyria-"is eternal life in fellowship with God." Perhaps Calvin is correct that God turned Pharaoh over to Satan, but perhaps that state is no more permanent than His turning Job over to Satan.

While there is no real thought of ranking in v. 24, the mention of Israel as "the third" suggests that Israel will not even have some favored place among the chosen as a reward for its service, but will be one nation among many. God calls Israel his "firstborn son" in Exodus 4:22. But as Paul would see, God intends that the firstborn may be part of a large family (Romans 8:29). There, of course, it was Christ who was firstborn, and Israel is not Christ; Christ as the elect fulfilled the burden of obedience that Israel did not and has not. Christ brought about the promise of God in a way that Israel did not. Most of Israel resisted its election and chooses to live as one rejected. Yet Paul continues to hope for Israel's full inclusion. Barth writes that we cannot, of course, call Israel rejected, because "the object of election is neither Israel for itself nor the church for itself, but both together in their unity."<sup>43</sup> Indeed it is the whole earth together in its unity.

### Conclusion: 'Not lost but saved by fire'

At this point we move beyond Paul and his concerns in Romans to say that, because God's love and wrath toward other nations run parallel to that toward Israel, we may hope for the inclusion of all the communities and individuals who resist and reject. The rejected is also the chosen; indeed, "these transgressors are the ones on whose behalf the eternal love of God for Jesus Christ is willed and extended. ... [F]or his part the elect who stands at the head of the rejected elects only the rejected."<sup>44</sup> And it is not only the electing and elected Christ to whom we look. Because we know ourselves as sinners like Pharaoh, all our hope is founded on Christ as the reprobate one, because he bore our sins and made intercession for all. And the success of this sacrifice is in turn founded on the steadfast love of God and the steadfast obedience of Christ. This image of "twofold steadfastness" in Christ's pun-

ishment evokes Dante's hell and overturns it-God overcomes the evil of the inferno through "the constancy of love even in the fire of the wrath that consumes Him"<sup>45</sup>

Again, the overcoming of this eternal punishment makes no promises for this life. Suffering is still quite real in this life, perhaps especially for the elect. And rejection is still quite real. Yet the Bible calls believers to faith in powers beyond this life. And that is where hope for those who resist their election is located. The passage of Barth's that addresses this eschatological hope at first seemed hopelessly mealy-mouthed with its German grammar, but it unfolds itself a little more every time I read it:

"[Those who try to refuse grace] will not escape the rod of divine wrath. But this is also true, in its own way, of the elect. If the latter are not rejected, because of their election as it took place in Jesus Christ; if, although they incur the rod, they do not incur the sword of God; if they are not lost but saved by fire, then it is not to be expected of these others, again in view of the election as it has taken place in Jesus Christ, that truly and in the sight of God they are necessarily excluded from this distinction as by their lives they appear to be. We cannot say more than that this is not to be expected."<sup>46</sup>

What is to be expected? I think Barth's wording as it is translated is just a shade too strong. Even though Isaiah closes with another image of the nations coming to Jerusalem to serve him as priests, we do not escape without a final threat of judgment (66:24). One hopes that when, in the fullness of time, God "gathers up all things in him," this gathering will be a wholly joyous harvest, but there is enough talk of chaff and outer darkness in the Bible to sober our hopes and to call us to speak to the world the good promises of the Gospel. Still, let no one name Esau or Pharaoh as though they were indisputably and eternally condemned. The destruction of the ordinary vessel may not be final. No one but Christ completes his salvation until the eschaton; until then, hope endures.



## Notes

1. Barth p. 117
2. ibid. 352
3. Bruce McCormack, unpublished lecture, "The Place and Importance of the Doctrine of Election in Reformed Theology," p. 83
4. Calvin, *Institutes* III.xxiii.14
5. Barth p. 64
6. ibid. p. 65
7. Calvin, *Institutes*. III.xxiii.7)
8. Bruce McCormack, unpublished lecture, "The History of the Doctrine of Predestination/Election Assessed in the Light of Scripture," pp. 27-54
9. Barth p. 149
10. ibid. p. 188
11. Von Rad p. 104
12. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 56
13. Calvin too acknowledges as much; cf. *Institutes* III.xxii.6
14. Barth p. 355
15. Davis p. 58
16. Kierkegaard p. 33
17. Barth p. 354
18. For Paul, such an ei-clause may indicate a condition assumed to be contrary to fact (Rom. 11:21) or a condition of uncertainty (Rom. 8:9). For further notes, see *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Third Edition*, F.W. Danker ed., p.277
19. Barth p. 356
20. ibid. p. 343
21. cf. Joshua 11:6, 2 Kings 1:15, Isaiah 37:6, Isaiah 44:8, Jeremiah 1:8 and 42:11, Matthew 1:20 and 28:5, Luke 1:13 and 1:30, Acts 18:9 and 27:24
22. Barth p. 316
23. Of course, foreknowledge may be logically connected to foreordination, but it is not quite the same thing.
24. Furthermore, it is not until after the sixth plague (9:12) that God actually appears as the subject of the hardening. However, I think it is disingenuous to say that the earlier passive forms ("Pharaoh's heart was hardened") do not suggest divine action in light of 4:21.
25. Calvin, *Institutes* II.iv.4
26. I take the fact that Pharaoh's individual demise is not depicted as another indicator that we are to understand this punishment of God as corporate, not individual.
27. Barth pp. 26-27
28. ibid. p. 211
29. cf. Fretheim p. 212: Israel is called to "a mission that encompasses God's purposes for the entire world. Israel is commissioned to be God's people on behalf of the earth which is God's." [his emphasis]
30. These themes come to a head around two particular "political" issues: intermarriage and reliance on foreign treaties. As it happens, these correspond to two of the most important themes of the law: purity (or holiness) and reliance on the Lord alone. Israel has a very hard time deciding to what extent it ought to embrace foreigners, a debate that begins shortly after Israel is identified as a chosen people (cf. Gen 24:3-4, 27:46-28:2) and continues to the end of the history that the Old Testament tells about Israel (cf. Ezra 9-10). In most propositional statements, intermarriage and reliance on treaties are denounced; it is

generally assumed that Israel's priestly function requires some level of ethnic purity. However, Moses' marriage to the Midianite Zipporah and David's mixed genealogy call these particularist claims into question.

- 31. cf. Barth p. 221
- 32. Seitz p. 154
- 33. Sawyer pp. 59, 65
- 34. cf. Watts
- 35. Brueggemann p. 161
- 36. Seitz p. 155

37. There are significant textual variations surrounding "City of the Sun"- עיר החרם. This is the reading of a number of manuscripts in Greek, Arabic and Hebrew. However, the critical edition (BHS) prefers עיר יהוד- "city of destruction." The Septuagint has yet another variation: polis asedek, "city of righteousness." In this context of a less-than-technical discussion, the best approach is probably not to put too much exegetical emphasis on any one of these possibilities.

38. Blenkinsopp p. 318. He translates the phrase differently: "swearing their oaths in the name of Yahweh of the hosts." But there is no word for "their oaths" in the Hebrew, and a similar form of שבע is translated as an oath of allegiance to Yahweh in Zephaniah 1:5.

- 39. Blenkinsopp p. 320
- 40. Seitz p.152
- 41. e.g. Blenkinsopp p. 319
- 42. Watts p. 258
- 43. Barth p. 199
- 44. ibid. p. 123
- 45. ibid. p. 125
- 46. ibid. p. 349

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# Sermons

## The Devil and Dr Luther

By Timothy George

Sermon Text: 1 Peter 5:8

In his book, *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich outlined the history of (what we used to call) Western civilization in terms of three recurring types of anxiety. The end of classical antiquity, he claimed, was marked by ontic anxiety, an intense preoccupation with fate and death. Toward the end of the middle ages, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation predominated. This in turn gave way, at the end of the modern period, to the spiritual anxiety of emptiness and loss of meaning. In fact, all three types of anxiety mentioned by Tillich were amply present on the eve of the Reformation. Death, guilt, and loss of meaning resound with jarring dissonance in literature, art, and theology of this period.

A morbid preoccupation with suffering and death pervaded Europe in the late Middle Ages. At the root of this experience were the twin phenomena of famine and plague along with a new epidemic, syphilis, introduced in the sixteenth century. In addition to these “natural” disasters, the invention of the gunpowder cannon elevated warfare to a new savagery.

The vision of death manifested itself in sermons and woodcuts as well as in the painting and sculpture of the times. Tombs were frequently adorned with images of a naked corpse, its mouth agape, its fists clenched, and its bowels devoured by worms. One of the most popular pictorial representations was the danse macabre, the Dance of Death. Death, in the form of a skeleton, appeared as a dancing figure leading away his victims. No one could escape his grasp—neither the wealthy merchant, the corpulent monk, nor the poor peasant. An hourglass was usually in a corner of the picture to remind the viewer that life was swiftly passing away.

The close connection between death and guilt is seen in this statement from John Calvin: “Where does death come from but from God’s anger against sin? Hence arises that state of servitude through the whole of life, that is the constant anxiety in which unhappy souls are imprisoned.” (CNTC 2: 485). Moral anxiety, which Tillich took to be the dominant motif of the age, arose from the fact that death implied judgment, and judgment brought the sinner face to face with a severe

God, a holy God of wrath and retribution. The dire predicament of this situation is seen in the oft-depicted deathbed scenario where angels and demons alike vie for possession of the dying person’s soul.

The church, of course, offered many channels of forgiveness to assuage the guilt which weighed so heavily on the souls of the people. Indulgences, pilgrimages, relics, veneration of the saints, the rosary, feast days, adoration of the consecrated host, recital of many “Our Fathers”—all of these were part of the penitential system whereby one sought to assure a proper standing before God. All the while the flames of purgatory and hell crackled and reached into this life. As one illustrated catechism said, “The pain caused by one spark of hellfire is greater than that caused by a thousand years of a woman’s labor in childbirth.”

The themes of death and guilt are related to what was perhaps the overriding anxiety of late medieval society, a crisis of meaning. In every area of life the old static boundaries were being transgressed. The voyages of Columbus, Vespucci, and Magellan shattered the old geography. The medieval motto for Gibraltar, *ne plus ultra*, became simply *plus ultra*, more beyond. Additionally, there existed political upheaval, social and economic decay, the pope fighting the emperor, peasants overthrowing their lords, a world turned upside down. As Shakespeare put it, “Oh, when degree is shak’ed, Which is the ladder of all high designs, the enterprise is sick” (*Troilus and Cressida*). The very meaning of life as it had been known for a thousand years and more seemed to be crumbling all around.

Luther is so fascinating to us because in his own spiritual struggles he epitomized the hopes and fears of his age. He was, as Stephen Ozment has said, just like everybody else, only more so. Struck down in a thunderstorm, fearing imminent death, he vows to become a monk. Once in the monastery, he is plagued with an overwhelming sense of guilt. Most terrifying of all were the assaults of dread and despair, the *Anfechtungen* he called them, when he teetered on the brink, when the meaning of his life, and of life itself, seemed up for grabs.

Luther explained all of this in terms of a struggle with the powers of darkness, with the Devil. For Luther life is never passive, and life is never neutral. This was his problem with Erasmus. Dear, sweet, reasonable, moderate Erasmus! For Erasmus theology was something you would discuss over quiche and a Perrier preferably. But Luther said: “It is not speculating, but

living, nay, dying, and being damned which make a theologian." While Erasmus acknowledged the need for grace, and thus was not a pure Pelagian, in his soteriology the human is still more or less an autonomous, self-sufficient being: captain of my own ship, master of my own fate. Luther plays with a different metaphor: we are like a horse ridden either by God or by the devil. So the ultimate question of life is not: "Who are you?" but rather, "Whose are you?" To whom do you belong? Who is your Lord?

Now let's face it: the Devil has had a pretty hard time of it in Christian theology. Satan may be alive and well on planet Earth, but he hasn't impressed the theologians very much. In the early church Origen had a full-blown demonology, but he believed everybody would be saved in the end, including the Devil. For Augustine the Devil is clearly an embarrassment. With his Neoplatonic view of evil as non-being, as a deficiency in reality, he has little room for a personal ragging center of evil, though of course he admitted the existence of the Evil One.

Calvin would never have talked back to Satan! As for Schleiermacher, with his stress on the uniformity and rationality of the universe, the Devil was little more than a formal principle. Moreover, you will comb through all 13 volumes of Barth's great *Dogmatics* to find precious little about the Prince of Darkness. Barth had hefty angels but puny devils.

Luther, on the other hand, saw life in terms of a great struggle between God and his people and the powers of evil and darkness. Over against the theological tradition of demonic reticence, Luther said: "The Devil is as wide as the world: he extends from heaven down to hell." Throughout his whole life, Luther was pestered by the devil. There was the occasion of his first mass. This was a big event, sort of like graduating from seminary today. His father Hans Luther had come, despite the fact that he had never approved of his son's decision to give up the study of law to become a monk. Luther was terrified at the thought of celebrating his first mass: the idea of holding in his hands the very body and blood of Christ. As Roland Bainton described the scene, Luther had to hold on to the table to keep from collapsing. Then, utterly limp, he came out and sat down at the banquet next to his father. Having trembled in the presence of his heavenly Father, he sought solace from his earthly father.

He said: "Father, are you still disturbed that I became a monk?" It was the wrong question. Hans Luther, who had been doing his best to contain himself, flared up: "You wise fool. Don't you know the

Scripture commands you to care for your parents. You've left your mother and me to fend for ourselves in our old age." "But father I can do more for you by my prayers in the monastery than if I had stayed in the world, and besides I was called by a heavenly vision." "Eh..." said Hans Luther, "God grant it wasn't of the Devil!"

He had touched a sensitive nerve. Doesn't St. Paul say that the devil often disguises himself as an angel of light? There was a story that once the Devil had appeared as Christ himself to St. Martin of Tours, after whom Martin Luther was named. St. Martin looked at him, resplendent in his glory, and said, "Where are the nail-prints?" And immediately the apparition vanished. Where are the nail-prints? Was it the voice of God or the insinuation of the Fiend which had prompted Luther to take that vow in the thunderstorm?

Thomas Merton once wrote of the "private devils that hang like vampires on the soul." So it was with Luther. "Are you alone wise?" the Devil would ask him. "Can 1500 years of Church tradition be wrong, and you alone be right?" The private demons, they were there in his dreams, his nightmares. Luther said, "I've slept with the Devil more times than I've slept with Kate."

Now Luther had his ways of dealing with the Devil, mind you! Especially in the Wartburg Castle: isolated from friends there in this great fortress, exposed to the full force of the winds, there were all kinds of poltergeist noises, owls and bats wheeling about in the darkness, devil pelting nuts at the ceiling all night.

We all know the story of Luther hurling the ink-pot at the devil. This is probably a legend, despite the fact that when you go to the Wartburg today (for a couple of euros) they will show you the very spot where the ink supposedly splattered onto the wall! I think they put a little fresh ink on it now and then to make it seem authentic!

The earliest version of this legend dates from later in the sixteenth century, and it sounds more genuine to me. In this account, it is not Luther who throws the ink well at the devil, but the devil, frustrated and enraged that his assaults on the reformer have come to naught, who takes the ink-pot and hurls it at Luther! But Dr. Luther ducks just in time and the ink spatters all over the wall!

Luther did have a way of making the Devil mad as hell, so to speak. He would enter into dialogue with him, speak right up to him. Once the Devil told him he was such a great sinner. "I knew that long ago," replied

Luther. "Tell me something new." "Christ has taken my sins upon himself and forgiven them long ago. Now grind your teeth."

Sometimes he would bait the Devil, taunt him: "St. Satan pray for me," or "Physician, cure thyself." Sometimes he got downright vulgar with the devil. Once when the Devil brought out a catalogue of his many sins, Luther replied: "Sweet devil. I know the whole list. Also write on it that I have messed in my breeches, then hang that around your neck and wipe your mouth on it." Yes, I think it must have been the Devil who threw the ink-pot!

Luther took great comfort in music. He said, "The Devil is in Polter-und Rumpel Geist, a noisy and boisterous spirit. He cannot abide the sounds of godly music. Luther's hymns reflect his struggles with the Prince of Darkness:

In devil's dungeon chained I lay  
The pangs of death swept o'er me  
My sin devoured me night and day  
In which my mother bore me.  
Then spoke the Son, "Hold thou to me  
From now on thou wilt make it  
I gave my very life for thee, And for thee I will stake it  
For I am thine and thou art mine  
And where I am our lives entwine  
The Old Fiend cannot shake it.

Luther's children brought him solace, too. When he saw his little son Martin nursing at his mother's breast, he said, "Child, your enemies are the pope, the bishops, Duke George, Ferdinand, and the Devil. And there you are sucking away unconcernedly."

Once when his little daughter was prattling on about Christ, angels, and heaven, Luther said: "My dear child, if only we could hold fast to this faith." "Why papa," said she, "don't you believe it?" Luther commented, "Christ has made the children our teachers. Although I am ever so much a doctor, I still have to go to the same school with Hans and Magdalena, for who can understand the full meaning of this word of God." "Our Father who art in heaven?"

What does Dr. Luther and his struggle with the Devil have to say to us, across the chasm of the centuries? In recent years there has been a revival of the occult—witches, mediums, astrologers, professors of Satanism: they are everywhere, on Jerry Springer, Phil Donahue, even Oprah. Correspondingly, there has been in some sections of the church a renewed interest in casting out demons. Usually they are pretty domesticated demons like the nicotine demon, or headache demon, or the demon of not paying your tithes.

I do not wish to disparage that kind of experience altogether, for I do believe there is a proper rite of

exorcism in the Christian church. But for the most part that kind of demonic exhibitionism, far from taking evil seriously, merely trivializes it.

But for us and our kind, the temptation is quite different. It is to demythologize the demonic, to psychologize it, to see Luther as the befuddled child of a superstitious age. And this, I think, is a tragic mistake...for fundamentally Luther's problems are our problems as well.

Death—despite our efforts to smother its ugliness in plush-carpeted funeral parlors, to talk about it as a normal and natural part of life, despite all of this, death remains for us what St. Paul said it was, an enemy to be overcome.

Guilt—you can't be a pastor or a counselor for very long without realizing the terrible sense of inadequacy and self-condemnation, the almost desperate need that all of us have for absolution, for someone to say, "It's all right."

Meaning—no one can live on this side of Hiroshima and Auschwitz without, from time to time at least, staring into the abyss and wondering whether there is a God out there at all.

Remember it is a chief characteristic of Satan that he can change forms—he's a chameleon. Luther said, if we could recognize the Devil, if we could name him, then we could dispel him. But he slithers about in the most beguiling of disguises.

When Adolf Eichmann was on trial in Israel for gassing hundreds of thousands of Jews, do you know what he said? "Why, I never even saw the ovens. I never even smelled the gas." He didn't listen to people screaming. He listened to Mozart. He sat at a nice mahogany desk and signed the forms. He went home at night and made love to his wife and petted his cat and systematically masterminded the Holocaust without even having to touch one of those "filthy little naked Jews" about to go into the gas chamber. What is demonic about this is not only that millions of innocent people were killed, but that the plans were executed with such insensitivity and rationality by persons who claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. Where are the nail prints, Martin?

The essence of the demonic is to twist and break, to demand, and dominate, and destroy. It is systemic in our society—in the racial prejudice which still festers in our nation, in the lack of compassion for the helpless, the disabled, the aged, the unborn, in the culture of death and violence that destroys and dehumanizes. And yes, in our own lives too, for like Luther we too have our own private demons which only the grace of God can exorcise.

The heart of Luther's thought is his theology of the cross. And the cross is the scene where ultimate triumph over the powers of darkness has been wrought. There Christus Victor, Lord Sabbath his name, did seize the initiative; there once and for all Christ Jesus won the victory against the most sinister coalition of evil the powers of hell could muster. Yet not by dominating and bludgeoning and throwing his weight around (there were no angels from heaven), but by the power of suffering love, the omnipotence of powerlessness. At the end of it all, when the devil and his power have done their worst, our Lord can still say according to Luke's gospel, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Through that triumph we who belong to Jesus Christ also share a victory over the powers of darkness. Victory over death: I believe in the resurrection of the body. Victory over guilt: I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Victory over meaninglessness and despair: I believe in the life everlasting. Yes, Satan is still loose for a little season. Yes, we still have to fight for our footing amidst the struggle, the thrust and counter-thrust of battle. But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.



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## The Triune God

by Colin Gunton

*Delivered on Trinity Sunday, 6 June 1993*

Sermon Text:

"Through him [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." Ephesians 2:18

### I

**T**he story is sometimes told of a young clergyman, just beginning his ministry, who asked his bishop what he should preach about. "Preach about God and about 20 minutes," was the reply. The advice is good in both respects, particularly the former. What, other than God, is there to preach about if we are to be freed from the clinging self-concern, our interest in our religious and moral navels, and given a vision from outside with which to shape our lives in the world? The religious progress of Samuel Taylor Coleridge is here instructive. As a young man, he believed that the old Greek adage, "know thyself" was

the key to life and thought. As he grew older, he was that this was wrong. "Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God" goes the end of "Self-knowledge," one of his late poems. That, as he rightly saw, is the beginning and end of wisdom. And it is the beginning and end of the Christian gospel. The gospel is about God, God made known in Jesus Christ and the Spirit to cleanse the world, renew and perfect it, so that it may be presented without stain at the last before the throne of grace.

And so the calling of the Christian preacher is to preach about God, not God in the abstract but God as he makes himself real in the world. But there is the question for today. Only once in the year are we encouraged by the tradition of all the western churches to preach not just about God, but about the Trinity; and once a year is quite enough, in the opinion of many preachers. What is the point of all that stuff about three persons in one substance, of attempting to make three go into one? Can't we simply talk about God, without all those abstractions? Are they not just theory, and quite irrelevant to the business of living in the world? What I hope to do now is to suggest that quite the opposite is the case: that far from being abstract and irrelevant, the Trinity has to do with quite concrete matters. And as I have mentioned Coleridge once, let me refer to him once again. It was as he deepened his Trinitarian vision that he came to say the things that he said in that poem from which I quoted. For him, the doctrine of the divine Trinity was at the heart of what it meant to be truly human in the world. Why that is so I shall hope to explain later.

### II

But first, our text. "Through him [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:18). Notice how the writer uses a Trinitarian way of speaking: through Christ, in one Spirit, to the Father. And he is speaking to a quite concrete situation. Let us examine it by asking some questions of the text. First, who are the "we both"? The letter is addressed to congregations which were made up of peoples from once irreconcilable communities, Gentile and Jew. The meaning of this can be brought out by referring to an almost shocking modern equivalent, which perhaps says much about our failure in our land to live the life of Christian people. Suppose this were to be said to a mixed congregation of Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics. It is part of the scandal of our history that there are so few to which it could be written: "we both..." For that is what our author is writing about, and that is what I mean when I talk about being concrete. Something had happened as a result of the

preaching of the gospel that was almost beyond belief, that by being brought to the Father through the Son two alienated communities had become one.

But notice — and that brings me to the second question to the text — that they are not brought together by the vague and woolly talk of “reconciliation” that is so much the fashion of our times. They are brought together because they both have access to God the Father through what one early theologian called his “two hands,” the Son and the Spirit. What, then, is meant by “access”? The word is not a chance one. It has as its background Hebrew thought about how a sinful people could come before a holy God. We saw something of what that meant in our Old Testament reading. The book of Leviticus, for all its strange and sometimes, to our modern ears, repellent imagery and regulations brings to our attention the central point. God is a holy God, and human beings cannot, as they are, come into his presence. Our uncleanness makes it impossible. And so the Old Testament shows how access to God was made possible: by a ritual in which one man, a priest, did before God that which was necessary to atone for the sins of the people. The people were able to come before God because the high priest had access to him one a year.

The New Testament, however, is unanimous that this is not enough. All, not just the high priest, need access to God, all need to be cleansed so that they are made fit to come into his presence. And so universal access to God becomes of great importance for some of the New Testament authors. This letter, Paul elsewhere, and almost the whole argument of the Letter to the Hebrews, are concerned with it. When the Gospels tell that the veil of the temple was torn in two at the death of Jesus, they make the same point: through this death, the way to the Father, to the holy of holies, is made open to all. Access to the Father is through the Son and in the Spirit.

There is a way for man to rise  
to that sublime abode  
an offering and a sacrifice,  
a Holy Spirit's energies,  
an advocate with God.<sup>1</sup>

Notice how those lines, written by the Congregationalist Thomas Binney, exactly reproduce the trinitarian pattern of access we have met in our text. An offering and a sacrifice, an advocate ..., on the one hand; a Holy Spirit's energies, on the other. It is no surprise to me, when looking up Binney in the history of Congregationalism, to find that he is credited with restoring to nineteenth-century worship “the adoration and godly fear that had been lost.” That is the heart

of the matter. The triune God is the one who gives us, who are unworthy, access to himself — the God who opens himself to us so that we may share his life. That is why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. It points us to who and what kind of God our God is: not a distant or inaccessible deity, but one who through his Son and Spirit brings us into the fellowship of love that he is eternally.

### III

Before I go into something of what that means, let us think a little about the general matter of access. During a reform of the structure of my college some years ago, the question was raised: Who has access to the Principal — that is, who has the right to go to the top, to be able to influence directly the way our life is shaped? Access to people is one of the keys to our life in our complex modern society. For the grim fact is that so many of our ways of doing things restrict personal access. I have had, for example, general practitioners telling me that recent reforms mean that they spend more time filling in forms, while teachers spend more time being snowed under with paper, which must be read at the expense of time with pupils. On the other side, the theologian Paul Tillich is said to have refused to have his telephone calls routed by his secretary. He was not going to allow a barrier to be placed between himself and his students. But that is not the common pattern. What it is like for those ordinary people whose only access to authority is through a wall of bureaucratic obstruction, we do not have to work very hard to imagine. (Karl Barth defined a bureaucrat as someone who will not look you in the eye.) Perhaps the symbol of the bad side of the modern world is that access means a plastic card that gives access to material, rather than truly personal, goods.

Am I in all this just playing with words, making a link between the access Paul speaks about and the problem of life in the modern world? I do not think so. Personal access — access to people, in which we give and receive to and from one another — is the center of what it is to be human in community. And the doctrine of the Trinity is not about abstract theological theory, but the primacy of the personal. That God is Father, Son and Spirit says that in his innermost being, from and to eternity, God is personal: he is what he is by virtue of what the persons are in their relations to one another. And God gives access to himself, really brings us into relation to himself, in the utterly personal way that is his self-giving in Christ and the Spirit. Access to God, the creator of all there is, is not by obeying some law, or by absolute submission to power, or by anything that makes us less than personal. Access to God

is through the person of his Son, realized by his Spirit.

To see something of what that means, let us return to where I began, with the instruction to preach about God. There is a sense in which, as I have argued, that is very important. The vision of God as personal and the basis of the personal is one of the things we have to offer the world: and therefore we must speak about it, proclaim it. But our chief task is not so much to speak about God, as to speak from God. As we have seen, there is a desperate need in our world for personal values, for the priority of the personal over the bureaucratic and the material. That does not come simply from talking about it. The key lies rather in shaping patterns of human community in the light of the gospel that through Christ we have access to God the Father in the Spirit — that is to say, in developing what can be called Trinity-shaped communities.

That is the church's calling. We stand in a relationship with God. Our life in the church is shaped by this relationship as week by week we stand under the word and around the table of the Lord. So long as our life is shaped by the Spirit of that Lord, we shall grow into patterns of community that reveal the priority of the personal that is so needed in our world today. That is also the point of the letter from which our text has

come. The author is writing to a church, and outlining the gospel about Jesus as a form of life through which human community is shaped and the world transformed. And there is only one way to that transformation: by being, through Christ and in the Spirit, brought into relationship with the God who is love in his deepest being.

And so the first and last thing we have to say about God the Trinity is that he is a God who enables us to worship him. In worship, we are truly brought to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit as we hear the word, break the bread and are enabled to respond in prayer and praise. God is a God of communion, who enables us to share something of his life. That is why what happens in worship is the center of life, and why the heart of the Christian life is thanksgiving and praise: praise through and to the triune God, who has called us to share the personal communion that is the heart of his being.



From *Theology Through Preaching: Sermons for Brentwood*, by Colin Gunton (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2001), pp.55-60. Reproduced by kind permission.

#### Notes

- i. Thomas Binney, "Eternal light," RS 83.

## A Tribute to Colin Gunton

By John Flett

On May 6, 2003 the church ecumenical lost one of its most erudite and trenchant voices. The Rev Prof Colin Ewart Gunton died suddenly at the age of 62. This was a shock which I and many others felt personally despite having minimal or no personal contact with Gunton. Perhaps this serves as a testament to the human quality of his theological work.

Gunton was a prolific writer, addressing topics beyond the scope of this short remembrance. Increasingly central in his conception, however, was the person and work of the Trinity, and the intellectual and moral state of modern western culture. The clearest expression of this is found in his 1992 Oxford Bampton lectures, published as *The One, The Three And The Many: God, Creation And The Culture Of Modernity*. Here Gunton begins with an examination of modernity and its problematic relationship with a deity considered in only monotheistic terms. He is seeking a theology of engagement, one which maintains the integrity of human particularity, and finds a framework in trinitarian hypostasis: "...if persons are, like the persons of the Trinity and by virtue of their creation in the image of the triune God, hypostases, concrete and particular, then their particularity too is central to their being" (p.196). Significant questions develop from his proposal. Nevertheless this move illustrates Gunton's unwavering intention to answer human questions from a theological perspective.

Gunton's work was positive and constructive. His most recent publication *Act and Being* (London: SCM Press, 2002) is a critical treatment of the negative theology which underlies the traditional discussion of the attributes of God. In contrast to traditional accounts of the attributes, which "amount to a denial of revelation" (p.67), Gunton asserts that "... in the light of the Gospel we must be free to confess that we are granted to know the very being of God" (p.111). Reflecting on the Johannine statement that "God is Spirit", he states that, "...God's being spirit appears to refer to the capacity of the creator to cross ontological boundaries: to interact with and become part of that which he is not" (p.115). Gunton concludes that, "The specification of God's difference from the world – that God is entirely Spirit – can be only understood in light of God's free relation to the world" (p.116). We would do well to have our personal theology shaped by participation in this enduring mission to the world.

There are rumors that during his time at CTI in 2002 Gunton was close to finishing the first of a multi-volume work on the Trinity. Let us hope that this finds its way into the public realm. For a Gunton bibliography (complete to Jan. 2002) visit: <http://www.deepsight.org/bibliog/gunbib.htm>

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# Reviews

## The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity

By Philip Jenkins

Oxford University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Scott Collins-Jones

Try asking the average North American, church-goer or not, who the average Christian is today, or what sort of Christian experience is normative for most believers in the world. Replies will probably paint a picture of white middle class residents of the Northern Hemisphere, residing in a state of relative tranquility in a more or less modern and industrialized urban center. Nothing could be further from the truth, as Philip Jenkins points out in his recent work, *The Next Christendom*. Jenkins' work is a mixture of historical and sociological work, along with some restrained and qualified futurism. For those familiar with the work of the deans of missional theology, Bosch, Sanneh, Walls, Guder and the like, much of Jenkins' work will cover familiar ground. Even still, those who are familiar with the Christendom critique made by missional theologians will find it capably summarized in popular form by Jenkins, whose work has been discussed in forums like *The Atlantic Monthly* and National Public Radio. Those who are newcomers to the aforementioned conversation should read Jenkins sitting down, as time honored understandings of the way things are and will be (and in some instances, the way things have been) will certainly be challenged. *The Next Christendom* is, in short, a must read.

Jenkins asserts that we are in the midst of an emerging transformation of Christianity, a revolution akin to the inclusion of Gentiles into a largely Jewish first century Church, or the attempt to reconcile Hebraic and Hellenistic thought forms in the fourth and fifth centuries. Whenever the Gospel's momentum in the world shifts, demographically, culturally or geographically, the Christian faith itself undergoes substantial change as well. This is certainly the case, and will continue to be so, as the growth and expansion of Christianity takes places in the Southern hemisphere, not primarily in North America or in Western Europe. This process is already well under way. Jenkins offers some arresting projections. By 2050, only about a fifth of the world's then 3 billion Christians will be non-

Hispanic whites. The phrase "White Christian" may sound "like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as 'a Swedish Buddhist'" (3). In fact, contrary to Samuel Huntingdon's popular thesis in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Islam will not likely surpass Christianity. Jenkins thinks that the most reliable demographic sources (which he acknowledges certainly only deal in possibilities and projections) estimate that by the middle of the 21st century, there will three Christians for every two Muslims in the world, with the former making up 34 percent of the world's population.

Jenkins asserts that one reason that we misunderstand the present state of Christianity, and thereby underestimate its future, lies in our ignorance of its past. He is critical of histories that portray Christianity's historical eastern frontier as Jerusalem, from which a solely Western expansion took place. Such a story ignores the significance of early Christian centers found in places like Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia. "Christian art, literature and music all originated in these lands, as did most of what would become the New Testament" (17). Indeed, monasticism had African, not European, origins, beginning in Egypt. Jenkins notes that the center of gravity for Christianity as late as the 6th century was Syria, not Rome. He also documents Christianity's early eastern progress that extended as far as China and India. Again, much of this information is lost to the average Westerner. Thankfully Jenkins presents this material in succinct terms, accessible to a popular audience.

Jenkins' discussion of the Western missionary effort is also commendable. His treatment neither romanticizes nor demonizes this movement. He points to some of the lamentable aspects of Western mission, including cultural insensitivity and at times an all-too-excessive entanglement with imperial and colonial interests. But the sources of most contemporary Westerners' views of mission, largely popular books like *The Poisonwood Bible* or films like *The Mission* or *Black Robe*, don't tell the whole story of the missionary efforts of the second millennium, painting as they do in quite broad strokes. Jenkins offers a more nuanced and subtle picture. Building on the work of scholars like Lamin Sanneh, he notes the painstaking efforts that many missionaries made in order to translate the Scriptures and other religious texts into the vernacular, indigenous languages of people groups in

places like Africa and Asia. Indeed, it was often the missionaries who protected the indigenous cultures by keeping their languages alive in the face of colonial hegemony.

Jenkins' work is not short on sociological description, analysis, and explanation. But unlike so many social scientists, the sort whom John Milbank critiques in his magisterial *Theology and Social Theory*, Jenkins doesn't think that one can understand or explain the relative success of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere in strictly sociological terms. We can, "...certainly suggest all sorts of reasons why Africans and Asians adopted Christianity, whether political, social, or cultural; but one all-to-obvious explanation is that individuals came to believe the message and found this the best means of explaining the world around them" (44).

Walter Buhlmann coined the term "Third Church" to describe the same movement which Jenkins calls "The Next Christendom." Buhlmann and Jenkins both see the emergent Southern Christianity as the sort of powerful cultural and religious force that the Western (Catholic and Protestant) and Eastern Churches have historically been. The former, like the latter, will not just affect world "spirituality," or the global "religious scene." Indeed, Jenkins doesn't think that one can understand the contemporary geopolitical sphere without studying Pentecostalism, anymore than one can understand the history of western political thought without reading Augustine, Aquinas and John Calvin. He laments the fact that at Penn State, where he teaches, a host of courses are offered on Buddhism and Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam, while students are largely ignorant of the ever growing Pentecostal movement, as well as other indigenous churches in places like Africa. Jenkins' own description of the "Next Christendom" might often lack significant nuance in its own right. At times he probably overemphasizes the commonality found among the rapidly growing churches of the South, and the rubric of Pentecostalism is a bit overused at points to group movements like the African Indigenous Churches and Latin American Pentecostals. In Jenkins' defense, he often qualifies such moves and acknowledges a degree of oversimplification. Such generalizations are probably unavoidable in a work like his, meant to offer a scholarly yet accessible survey of a vast amount of material. Such shortcomings certainly don't seriously limit this work's usefulness to the Church.

A significant portion of *The Next Christendom* is

devoted to the discussion of the theological and ecclesiological distinctiveness of the Southern Church.

Because of the descriptive character of Jenkins' work, he is generous in defining what exactly counts as "Christian," willing to count anyone Christian who considers themselves such no matter how nominal or lapsed. He is also willing to include a vast array of ecclesial movements as part of Christendom despite any and all heterodox views, even on seemingly central dogmas like the Trinity. Jenkins does however make belief in Jesus as more than "merely a prophet or an exalted moral teacher, but in some sense the unique Son of God, and the messiah," a minimum standard for Christian confession (88). The more confessionally inclined reader will no doubt be left wanting by such statements, wishing for more clarity (Jenkins doesn't see belief in the bodily resurrection as inextricably connected with an understanding of Jesus' unique divine sonship).

Whatever one thinks of Jenkins' assessment of what makes one or ones Christian, the diversity he points out in the growing Southern Church must be considered by those who think that defining a generous ecumenical orthodoxy is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor. Western Christians, those who compose the Church of the North, must remember that our own understanding of orthodoxy is shaped by a particular contextual embodiment of an ever translatable faith. Jenkins doesn't deny the existence of something like a "historic Christian faith." He merely insists that "we must be careful to distinguish the core idea from the incidentals" (109). There is simply no Logos a sarkos.

Jenkins points out that at the end of the day, much of the Southern Church remains fairly traditional theologically. This can be seen by its Anglican constituency's reaction to the recent election of a homosexual bishop in the American Episcopal Church. But even those who would consider themselves "evangelical" or "traditionalist" Christians will likely find the Southern approach to the present work of the Spirit, charismatic gifts, demonology, and realized eschatology somewhat foreign. Jenkins points out that the emphasis on the supernatural work of the Spirit as manifested in physical healing and prosperity leads in some cases to corruption. But it also may lead to the Northern Church becoming aware of just how culturally captive we have become to our secular culture's presuppositions, which make little room for any more than a Deistic divine presence in the world. The emergent "Southern" theological conservatism is also not wedded to political

conservatism as its “Northern” counterpart tends to be.

Ecumenical dialogue, relations, and cooperation will certainly be changed as the emergent Southern Church becomes more and more a part of the conversation. It may be that what will be required for such discussions to be fruitful is a theology like Karl Barth’s, which could easily permit a wide array of forms and freedom where ecclesiology was concerned, because of the critical distance Barth saw between revelation and the cultural, creaturely forms which bear witness to it. The former never becomes captive or a predicate of the latter. Without some sort of similar understanding of Gospel and culture, it is all too easy for a particular cultural or ecclesial embodiment of the Gospel to become sacralized, to the exclusion of all others.

It has already been noted that Jenkins describes the explosion of the Southern Church as a new kind of “Christendom,” involving not just religious, but cultural and political implications as well. Jenkins mentions the emergence of new “Christian states,” noting Zambia and the Ivory Coast as examples, with possible parallels in Southeast Asia. Western readers, especially those conversant with the missional theology discussion in North America, will be well aware of the Christendom critique. The dangers of the Constantinian temptation are well known. An adequate political theology will need to be developed if the Southern Church is going to avoid the dualistic way in which the conversation continues to be framed in the North, with a kind of sectarian perpetual protest on the one hand and a Christian realist’s seemingly uncritical embrace of the Constantinian synthesis on the other. Perhaps the emergent Church of the South will be able to show us how and why Northern Christendom was in many ways such a failed and disastrous compromise, and how we might better navigate the precarious relationship between Gospel and culture in the future.

No one knows the time or the hour when Christ will return to fully usher in the new creation, making the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of our God. The day will certainly involve those of every tongue, tribe and nation singing praises to the Lamb. Whenever or however that Day comes, Jenkins’ work assures that the Spirit is coming closer and closer to realizing this end. I only hope the Northern Church survives long enough to join its Southern counterpart in that number, when the King and all his saints come marching in.



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### American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice

by Dana L. Robert

Merger University Press, 1997 (reprint 1998).

Reviewed by Bethany Hanke

In her book, *American Women in Mission*, Dana L. Robert begins to fill a gaping hole in the history of the American Christian missions. There have been many important works covering the full chronological expanse of the history of American missions. However, Robert has found that few, if any, give specific attention to the role of women. Furthermore, works that do address the role of women compartmentalize the history of their involvement according to theological camps, singly addressing either the mission work and thought of conservative evangelicals or the Protestant mainline church. Seeking to move beyond both ignorance and compartmentalization, Robert has plunged into the wealth of “raw and uncharted” sources with the goal of providing a foundation for a holistic explication of the vital role of American women in mission (xx). Interwoven through her historical analysis is her argument for the existence of several “mission theories” which served to connect women across denominational lines (xix).

In the midst of a heavily detailed historical exposition, Robert draws a clear picture of the role of American women in mission as well as the evolution of this role. Beginning with the first port-of-entry into the mission field open to women at the time — that of missionary wife (18) — and relying primarily on the examples of Ann Judson and Harriet Atwell, Robert exposes the initial motives that drove these women — motives of “saving the heathen”(26) and “bringing in the millennial kingdom” (29). In the pursuit of these goals it was hoped that an attitude of “disinterested benevolence” would characterize all their endeavors (31). Women’s roles evolved from that of the missionary wife whose primary occupation was school-teaching, to that of the missionary wife who developed the “Christian home.”

One of the consequences of missionary wives teaching in field schools was an increased emphasis upon higher education for women and a corresponding development of a deeper level of education in schools on the mission field. The evolution of women’s roles and the development of higher education were instrumental in what Robert has found to be a crucial shift in the port-of-entry for women into mission work. Whereas eighteenth and early nineteenth century women such as Ann Judson and Harriet Atwell were

allowed access to missionary service only through marriage, in subsequent decades this gave way to a predominance, in number and in effectiveness, of single women as missionaries. This was propelled, for example, by Mary Lyon's founding of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and exemplified in the lives of women such as Fidelia Fiske.

In each period that Robert traces, unifying mission theories pervade. These unifying theories include the urgent desire for one's ministry to be "useful," the quest for a "holistic" ministry which fulfills both spiritual and physical needs<sup>1</sup> and the tension developing around the equation of civilization with evangelization (although not always a temptation for women with holistic aims). This last theory was amplified by the expansion of Western imperialism and exemplified by the distinction between the "Women's Work for Women" movement and "faith missions."

Robert argues that one of the gendered characteristics of women in mission was the growing sense of ecumenical unity in lieu of denominational identity. The climactic example of this ecumenical unity was the (now-forgotten) 1910 Woman's Missionary Jubilee. This idea of ecumenical unity is harnessed by Robert as a symbol of the whole realm of American women in mission. She closes her book with the claim that "to reflect upon the mission theory of women is to glimpse a vision of the church as being less an institution than a way of life" (417). This is a noble idea, and a strong way to end a fascinating and thorough study. Indeed, it has become the goal of many theologians of recent decades to demonstrate that the Church's very being is inseparable from mission — the Church must be a being-in-mission. However, despite the fact that she gives an excellent overview of the history of Catholic women in mission, she neglects to demonstrate the way in which this either supports or weakens her argument for the existence of strong ecumenical unity among women in mission.

There is a clear distinction in Robert's book between the experiences of Protestant and Catholic women, without significant effort on her part at crossover. She completely compartmentalizes their histories, neither expounding on their differences (such as her brief mention of the Protestant focus on Christ's presence in the scriptures versus the Catholic focus on his inspirational presence in the Eucharist) nor on their similarities (such as her notation that, while early American women in mission were required to marry their way into the field, Catholic women were often required to take vows and join a religious order) (324). Despite the potential, no parallels are drawn, and no

evidence of an over-arching theory of mission is demonstrated. Her chronologically and theoretically separate address of the Catholic Church, despite its thorough and insightful information, undermines the strength of her otherwise hopeful claim that the church could exist "less an institution than a way of life."

Again, Robert has provided a wealth of greatly needed information in a captivating narrative. However, two additional questions are left unanswered. First, Robert's exposition of Protestant women in mission stops short of World War II, while surging well into the twentieth century in the study of Catholic missions. Her decision not to examine events in the Protestant world during this same time-period is perplexing. This reader is left with the desire to know the full, contemporary picture.

Second, an analysis of how post-Enlightenment thought — specifically the intellectual developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — shaped women's theories of mission would lend an additional dimension of depth to the book. In the introduction, Wilbert Shenk gives a succinct synopsis of the key elements of the Enlightenment worldview and reflects briefly upon the impact of its joust with religion. However, this powerful factor in turn-of-the-century history is not explored in Robert's analysis of the various mission theories and their evolution. For example, her brief mention of Ruth Hemenway's ministry in China and Hemenway's final fall into atheism would be an excellent opportunity to discuss the intellectual battles that Christians faced (301). Robert even has a footnote to David Bosch's book, *Transforming Mission*, which contains an excellent section regarding the influence of the Enlightenment upon subsequent understandings of the Gospel, and therefore, about mission (301). Given that she is familiar with this important text, it is perplexing that she makes no approach of this topic herself.

Overall, Dana L. Robert has made a wonderful and vital contribution to the study of American Christians in mission. Although she makes the disclaimer that her work is not exhaustive, it is still impressively thorough in many key areas. As a comprehensive and solid foundation, it is yet only the beginning of an essential project. This work, a first of its kind, invites others to continuing the building process.



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1. This was taken to a new level in the Pentecostal offshoots and "holiness" movements of the time.

# Bibliography

compiled by PTR staff

**A** good theological education will not only be exciting and challenging, but may also be somewhat disorienting and difficult. The staff of PTR humbly offer this list of books that have been helpful to us as we try to both to keep our moorings and also to press on towards greater faithfulness and a more mature and vital faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 320 pp.

This book navigates through much of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as other texts, while seeking honestly to address the question of what it means to take up one's cross and follow Jesus. Bonhoeffer's book, as well as life as a martyr under Nazi Germany, argues for a dramatic reevaluation of the costs of both sin, and therefore also grace, in the lives of Christ's disciples.

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1990), 192 pp.

G. K. Chesterton disproves, with one clever witticism after another, the common misconception that only the most recently discovered truths are reliable. He masterfully reveals the insight and excitement that accompanies Christian tradition and orthodoxy, thereby convincingly showing the serious faults inherent in "chronological snobbery" (as C.S. Lewis would later put it).

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1992), 564 pp.

A genius for plumbing the deep complexities of human nature, Dostoyevsky paints a fascinating story about sin and a desperate need for justice. *Crime and Punishment* is a twisting tale which tries to make sense of sin, salvation, and the search for freedom through it all.

Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 121 pp.

A very thin book that is vast in its implications. Forde offers a stark and challenging picture of what it truly means to live and think as a cross-centered theologian. The main body of the book is a commentary on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 25th Anniversary Edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2003), 256 pp.

If seminary life has caused your devotional life to become one-dimensionally academic, the *Celebration of*

*Discipline* can help to reclaim a more holistic approach to your Christian faith. Through the exploration of such classical spiritual disciplines as meditation, prayer, simplicity, and service, to name a few, Richard Foster powerfully reminds the reader that her Christian faith is to permeate every aspect of daily life.

Elouise Renich Fraser, *Confessions of a Beginning Theologian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 132 pp.

In this text Elouise Renich Fraser, systematician at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, documents her journey through the religious academy while highlighting the role of Christian love in theological dialogue, the development of her relationship with the biblical text, the importance of theological imagination, and the need to continually maintain one's identity and convictions despite pressures to conform. Seminarians will be both challenged and encouraged by this scholar's thoughtful reflections.

Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 744 pp.

In this collection of provocative essays, the outspoken Hauerwas lays out a vision of Christian ethics that seems both novel and refreshingly Christian at the same time. Whether or not you end up agreeing with the fiery Texan's proposals, at a minimum they will challenge you to rethink your notions of church, character, and the Christian life.

Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 240 pp.

A devotionally-oriented look at the scandalous nature of God's grace, as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Manning's book is as encouraging spiritually as it is challenging theologically.

Ayako Miura, *Shiokari Pass*, trans. Bill and Sheila Fearnehough (Singapore: Christian Literature Crusade, 1974), 272 pp.

Miura has been credited with single-handedly dispelling Japanese fear and prejudice against the Christian faith, through a story of sacrificial love. Inspired by John 12:24, "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it does, it bears much fruit," Miura's story gives the foreigner rare insight into Japanese life and concerns. A must read for any person interested in the encounter of Christianity with people of

other faiths and convictions.

Moravian Daily Texts, *The Journal* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Church in North America, 2003 edition)

First published in 1731, the Moravian Daily Text is based upon daily devotion to Scripture and will aid the busiest saint in developing a consistent time of devotional prayer and Bible study.

Andrew Murray, *Humility* (New Pennington: Whitaker House, 1982), 106 pp.

In a society filled with self-help manuals, the ones most lacking are those specializing in the Christian virtue of humility. Andrew Murray's *Humility* will challenge believers (especially future pastors and professors) to always "bend the knee" of their heart and mind to the lordship of Christ.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 255 pp.

What is the Christian message in a society marked by religious pluralism, ethnic diversity, and cultural relativism? How does the prevailing climate of opinion affect, perhaps infect, Christians' faith? Newbigin addresses such questions in this incisive analysis of contemporary culture, and he suggests how Christians can more confidently affirm the truth of the gospel in such a context.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1956) 320 pp.

Given in 1949 at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, these lectures constructed the categories by which cultural intersections with Christianity are still viewed and studied today. Every Christian concerned with how Christianity has interacted with its surrounding cultures in the past and how it should do so in the future should read this book.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in contemporary society* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 128 pp.

Nouwen maintains his usual devotional voice even in writing a book more explicitly focused on the theory of pastoral care. It is an encouraging message, urging pastors who feel depleted of their gifts, power and wisdom to consider that ministry is best based on that most universal and inexhaustible of human resources: our weakness.

John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 141 pp.

A short book of powerful theological reflections on the person of Jesus Christ. Read it over a weekend or in your devotional time; it will profoundly enrich and revitalize your vision of Jesus Christ, evoking praise and

wonder over the greatness and glory of our Savior.

Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 223 pp.

Offers an in-depth and broad analysis of the modern world's cherished "idols" that plague the church from within and without. In exposing the hindrances to the church's mission, Ramachandra offers empowering insight for those yearning to proclaim the gospel to the world.

Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage; A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 180 pp.

An excellent primer elucidating the development and content of evangelical theology from a historical perspective. Rather than define evangelicalism over and against its opposites, Ramm carefully engages with pre-modern, modern and post-modern theological milieus, extrapolating a balanced portrait of the church's evangelical heritage. Concise and easy to read, the book provides a helpful set of tools for critical thinking and fruitful engagement in the seminary environment.

John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1986), 383 pp.

Stott offers a clear and penetrating analysis of the multifarious facets of the cross. Much more than a simple atonement study, the book unfolds not just a theology of the cross but also its personal and ecclesial implications. Few books have dealt so comprehensively with this most vital of Christian doctrines.

T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 358 pp.

One of the great reformed theologians of the 20th century, Torrance named this as the one book with which he was most satisfied. Torrance has a fantastic way of joining the concerns of both Western and Eastern Christians into one reliable statement of patristic faith.

N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 817 pp.

This massive tome by one of today's most exciting New Testament scholars is best read out of order. Read the last two chapters for an overview of Wright's compelling argument for the historicity of the resurrection and for an inspiring exploration of why the reality of the resurrection matters. Then read any of the supporting chapters and enjoy a delightful marriage of learned scholarship and lucid writing.



